

Authoritarianism Redux:

Nine Years after Egypt's 2011 Revolution

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(Ahmed Ramadan - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook examines the state of affairs in Egypt nine years after the revolution, which started on January 25, 2011. While the protests eventually jettisoned Hosni Mubarak, a longstanding autocratic leader, and presented a real opportunity for democratization, the dreams for a free country were cut short by Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, who grabbed power in 2013 after a coup d'état. Since then, the situation in Egypt is deteriorating fast politically, economically, socially, and in terms of human rights. Therefore, this policy outlook explores several aspects of governance in Egypt: the economy, the social situation, the rule of law, and rights and freedoms, which represent essential pieces of the puzzle in understanding where the country may be heading.



An Egyptian protestor flashes 'Rabia sign' in front of a burning barricade a demonstration called "Massacre of the Century", marking the day security forces cracked down on the Rabaa al-Adaweya and al-Nahda sit-ins that 100 days since the dispersals of anti-coup protestors, at Al Nuzha Street on November 22, 2013 in Alexandria, Egypt. (Ahmed Ramadan - Anadolu Agency)

Introduction

The Egyptian revolution started on January 25, 2011 and was meant to be a harbinger of improved domestic conditions for Egypt's optimistic citizens. It began as a series of protests against various legal and political grievances, nepotism, corruption, police brutality, harassment, unemployment, social injustice, and censorship. While these issues have intensified nowadays because of the increasingly authoritarian administration of Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, who grabbed power in 2013 after a coup d'état, it is important to recall that in 2011 the Egyptian masses successfully jettisoned Hosni Mubarak, a longstanding autocratic leader. For a brief period leading up to El-Sisi coup on July 3, 2013, the Egyptian citizenry managed to practice free speech, engage in dialogue, imagine a different future, and participate in full in the public sphere.

The dreams for a free country were short-lived as the situation went on a dramatically different trajectory after the coup. The country seems to have been deteriorating fast on numerous fronts: politically, economically, socially, and in terms of human rights. The Egyptian regime is increasingly implicated in a climate of impunity in politically-motivated human rights violations against human rights defenders, journalists, and members of opposition parties. The suspicious [death](#) of the first and only democratically elected president in Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, in June 17, 2019, exemplifies the cruel and degrading treatment to which political prisoners are subjected. Even so, the 2011 Egyptian revolution has shown that change is possible, and in spite of the many obstacles laying before democratic transformation in the region, the groundwork has been laid for grassroots movements to capitalise on the engendered fragility of the current despotic regime.

Background

The Egyptian revolution succeeded in ousting Mubarak, who had held absolute power since 1981. Towards the end of his rule, Egyptians became increasingly frustrated with the status quo and injustices, which included harsh state-of-emergency laws and a lack of political freedom. This culminated in the January 25 protests, which saw up to [2 million people converge on Tahrir Square](#) in Cairo at its peak. He was ultimately forced to resign on February 11, 2011, with power being given to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces until elections could be held.

This was truly a watershed moment in Egyptian politics, and a prime example of the power that people yielded. The Arab Spring, a popular name which was given to the simultaneously held mass protests in several Arab countries, as a whole is an encouraging demonstration of the unworkable nature of systems that have little regard for democracy. This applies to Egypt's current dictator, el-Sisi. After his electoral victory in June 2012, Morsi was deposed on July 3, 2013 by an el-Sisi-led military coup d'état, further demonstrating the latter's disdain for genuine democratic processes. This is reflected in his oppressive policies which have gone beyond Mubarak's legacy. There are consequences of ruling through fear, with evidence of its unsustainability transpiring in the not-too-distant past. If the reservoir of external support runs thin, this will make it less a case of if el-Sisi will fall, but when.

Conversely, some authors argue that the revolution was [co-opted](#) from the onset by the military apparatus to reinforce its own interests. This thinking goes that, Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's son and hand-picked successor, was

severely [disliked](#) by the military establishment, which saw him as a great danger to their influence over the economy and other affairs. As a result, they sought an alternative figurehead to bolster its influence. While this view may have some merit, it ignores the prominence of the change activists who had laid years of groundwork at the grassroots to support the eventual revolution. Revolutions do not necessarily succeed at the first attempt, and it is disingenuous to assume the military played a key role in its engendering beyond displaying mild opportunism.

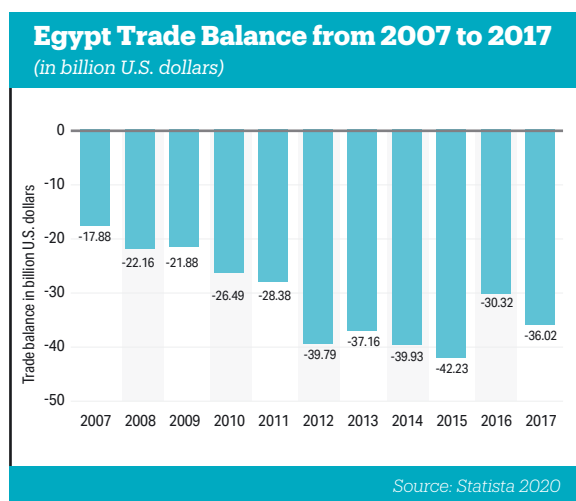
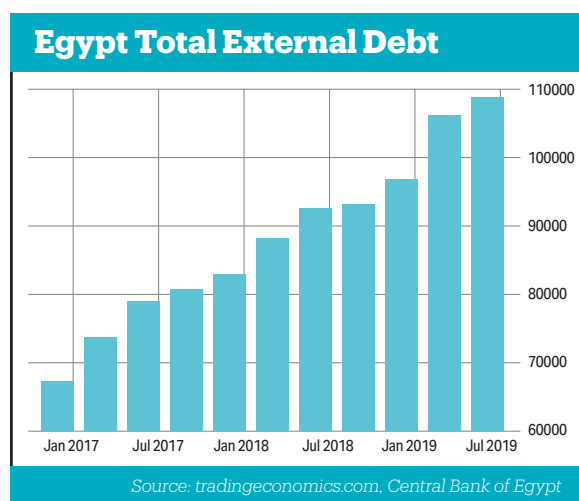
As Egypt's socioeconomic conditions and human rights record have continued in a downward spiral, people are again becoming increasingly frustrated by the status quo. El-Sisi's lack of experience and regard for people's welfare has, predictably, manifested itself in a rule that has been ridden with serious failures.

Economic Decline

One of the serious failures has been the economic decline under el-Sisi. This includes in measures like external debt, which has increased five-fold since he came to power, and public debt, which has doubled. For example, the Egyptian Pound has depreciated significantly, leading to undue pressures on the citizenry attempting to survive on meagre incomes. While growth rates are relatively strong, these have been propped up by unsustainable levels of debt, with [38%](#) of the Egyptian government's budget going only to pay off the debt-accumulated interest. Public resources are better allocated for critical functions like infrastructure and health, but the mismanagement of the economy by inexperienced officials has led to a pitiful state of affairs. The dependence on foreign aid is also imprudent, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE largely bankroll el-Sisi's agenda after also [being](#) the primary financiers of the coup d'état in 2013. In addition, el-Sisi's government has a stranglehold on the private sector and complements like Foreign Direct Investment are insufficient, with [two-thirds](#) of it being in the capital-intensive petroleum sector. Foreign Indirect Investment is also comparably much higher, which means Egypt do not receive benefits like technology or increased exports and employment.

Furthermore, the partnership with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has made austerity all the rage in a country suffering from widespread underfunding. The fact that growth rates are exaggerated due to being based on loans and debt is disregarded the same way that, while sizable, the foreign currency reserves also consist of borrowed money. The IMF's usual solution is for the government to cut subsidies, leading to a devastating cycle that affects ordinary people the most. While the lack of safety nets in Egypt also means that public finances are especially important, economic reforms are usually undertaken in the interests of the ruling elite. For example, cutting government salaries is not an option as much as cutting public spending is, in search of reducing the deficit and thereby qualifying for more loans from the IMF. This funding gap is at the heart of the economic decline, and el-Sisi's handling of the economy has made the issue only bigger.

Additionally, a trade deficit of [\\$36](#) billion exists according to the fiscal year of 2017/2018. Egypt's dependence on imports is severe, and the ongoing economic maladministration means that finances will continue to be directed at unproductive projects, like another [el-Sisi Palace](#). The latter was revealed in 2019 after contractor Mohamed Ali publicised the reckless spending by elites, including el-Sisi, who now has a [dozen or so](#) palaces. This caused immense uproar in the country and led to widespread protests; el-Sisi's [defence](#) was "Yes, we have built palaces and will build more". Moreover, Egypt's GDP is also in a fragile state. It relies heavily on consumption, which is at [93%](#) of GDP, with only 7% for the other variables, including government spending, investment, and net exports. With consumer needs mainly supported by imports, this affects another one of the rosy pictures attempting to be painted by the establishment's reliance on skewed indicators including GDP, foreign reserves, and the unemployment rate. When it comes to the latter, it is officially claimed that it has been in decline. However, under more intense scrutiny, this claim is shown to be questionable as some evidence shows it has been manipulated [not to include all new entrants to the labour force](#).

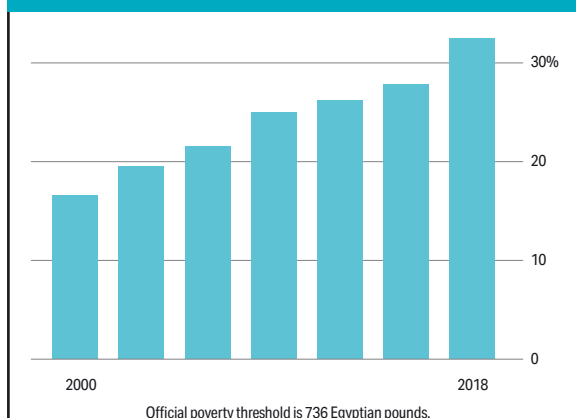


Social Issues

Poverty

One of the most significant social issues faced by Egypt nine years on from the Egyptian revolution is widespread poverty. For example, a World Bank [report](#) in April 2019 estimated that “some 60% of Egypt’s population is either poor or vulnerable.” This is an obvious concern which el-Sisi has both failed to grasp and resolve. The government’s official poverty line is one which many economists say is too low at 736 pounds (\$45) a month; at this rate, a short trip in Cairo on the metro could consume [a quarter](#) of monthly earnings. Poverty has impacted Egyptians greatly, with essentials like cooking oil becoming too expensive to afford and the charges for almost every service increasing.

Proportion of Egypt’s population living in poverty



Source: Egyptian statistical office

El-Sisi’s solution has essentially been to squabble over the measurements of poverty, with the World Bank’s poverty line of 950 pounds meaning even more people would accurately be considered officially poor. What this avoids is the more difficult path of finding a long-term solution. Social protection initiatives are inadequate, inefficient, and funded by loans – a trifecta that comes at a detriment to Egyptians seeking to stay afloat. Likewise, charities which had been making noteworthy contributions have been shut down due to factors like stringent security oversight. The spiralling of citizen’s socio-economic conditions has intensified the spotlight even further on government policy and decisions, such as the wasteful [\\$58bn project](#) launched by el-Sisi in 2015 to build a new capital.

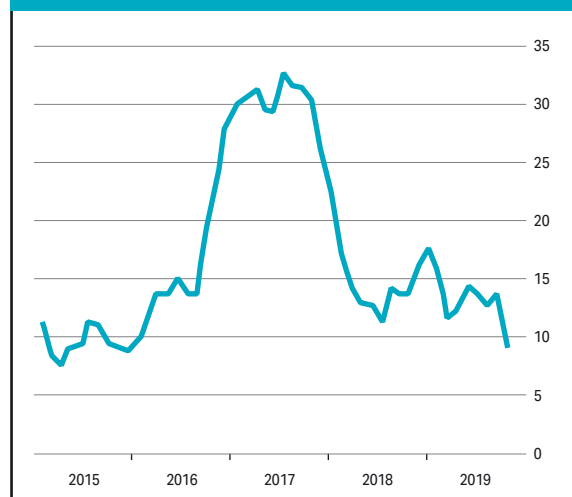
Inequality

Inequality is also another social issue faced in Egypt under el-Sisi’s rule, and the aforementioned report from the World Bank stated that “inequality is on the rise.” For example, Credit Suisse estimated that Egypt’s 2018 wealth Gini Coefficient was [90.9%](#), up from 80% in 2012, making it the third most unequal country in the world. While the wealthy can casually enjoy staples like beef, Egyptians on the other end of the wealth gap have to pay [9%](#) of

their weekly wage for a kilo. Moreover, income inequality has a direct impact on educational outcomes. Private schools offer higher quality education for its pupils, and with fees of at least [5,000 to 10,000](#) Egyptian pounds a year, many people are priced out. These same people who sent their children to private schools then send them to private universities, setting them up for life and thus further reinforcing the inequality in the country.

The government has hitherto failed in dealing with the rise of inequality. This inequality is made starker when the inflation rate that is in double digits is considered. While it has declined slightly as it has reached the end of a cycle, it was still high from a peak of 33% in 2017 (see the chart below). As a result, Egyptians have lower earnings than they did three years ago after adjusting for inflation, with purchasing power and living standards deteriorating. High inflation has intensified the consequences of inequality, as the poor do not have assets to hedge, and when coupled with laws like the regressive VAT tax introduced in 2016, has all but meant that inequality will remain entrenched under El-Sisi.

Egypt consumer prices % increase on a year earlier

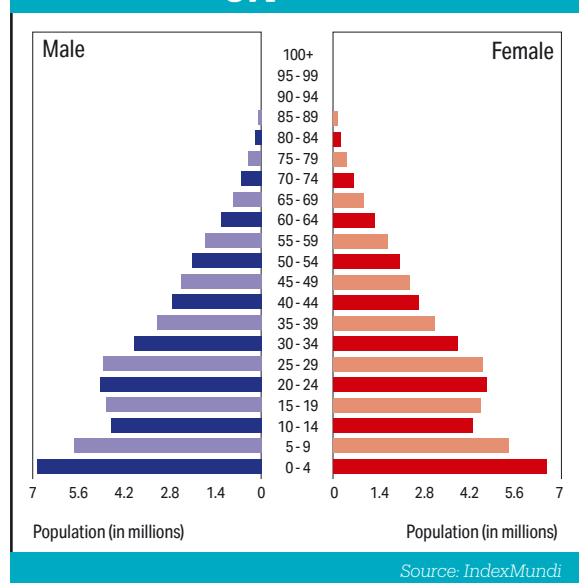


Source: Egyptian statistical office

Demographics

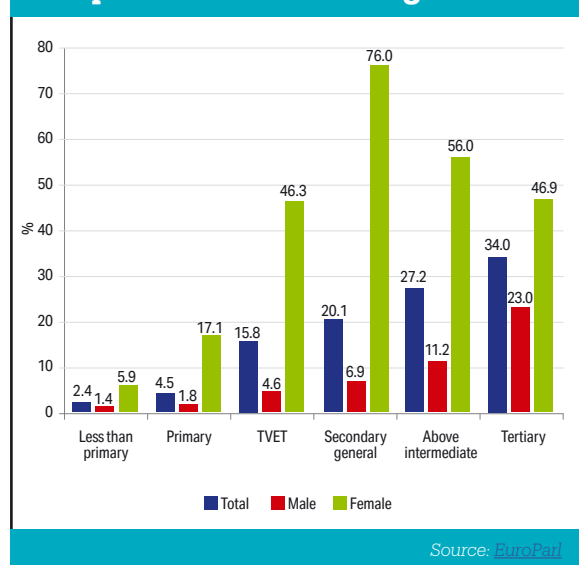
The demographics in Egypt are another social issue that should be noted. Egypt has a population of over 100m, which the UN estimates will reach [200m](#) by 2100 should the trend of substantial growth continues. The population is also based around dense areas, meaning urban centres will increasingly struggle to deliver services like health and housing – a dynamic that is unlikely to be addressed under el-Sisi and the military cabal in charge of development and the economy. Even now, the health care system, critical for living standards and productivity, has long been neglected and is under immense strain, requiring considerable funding to keep up with demand. Inequality in Egypt, coupled with irresponsible government priorities, has meant that it is the general public who suffer the greatest loss.

Egypt - 2018



Of the 100m, a significant part is composed of youth, with [40 per cent](#) between the ages 10 and 29. The youth unemployment rate is also very high, at [31.3](#) per cent according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and el-Sisi's government does not seem any closer to be tackling the structural conditions underlying this concern. This includes an underfunded educational system which serves as insufficient preparation for new entrants into the job market. For example, while illiteracy is prevalent even outside of school, [35%](#) of children entering middle school do not know how to read and write. El-Sisi's government has failed to improve conditions for students and to improve the chances of upward social mobility. Incidentally, in modern Egypt, the more one is educated the more likely they are to be unemployed (see the chart below), with reasons including a government-inhibited private sector and a lack of stable jobs in the formal sector.

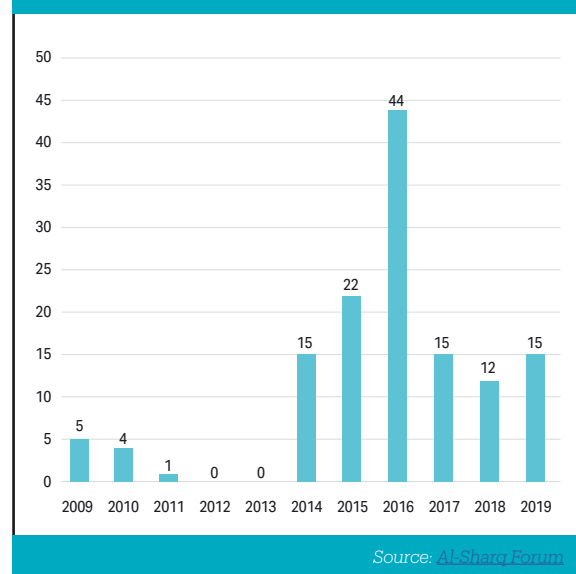
Youth unemployment rates by level of completed education and gender



Degradation of Human Rights

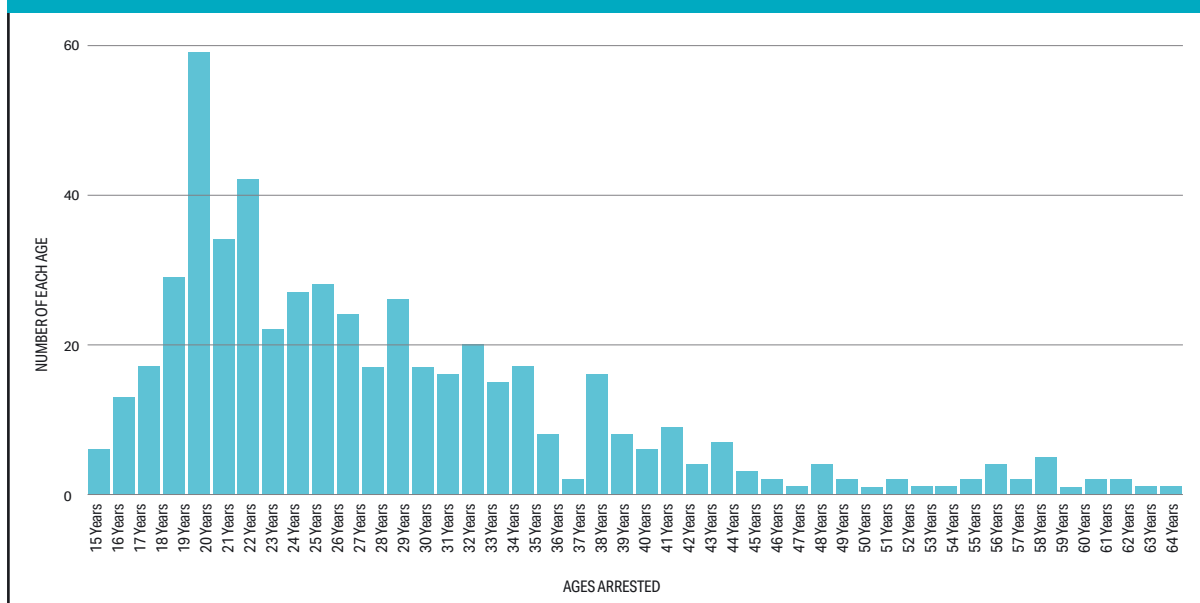
The treatment of human rights and political freedom in Egypt has also reached abysmal levels in recent years; analysts [say](#) that measures used by el-Sisi are worse than under Mubarak. Thousands are in jail on trumped-up charges and there is a lack of due process, leading to people being too scared to speak out. Countless die while in custody or in jail in dubious circumstances, including Egypt's last democratically elected leader, [Morsi](#), in 2019. The Scorpion Prison in Cairo exemplifies the appalling treatment to which inmates are subject; a 2016 Human Rights Watch (HRW) [report](#) discovered that staff "beat inmates severely, isolate them in cramped 'discipline' cells, cut off access to families and lawyers, and interfere with medical treatment." State Security Courts have also been used extensively as there is no chance of appeal, and civilians are hauled there after being arbitrarily arrested, or to similarly hostile military courts. Human rights are considered a formality for el-Sisi and his government, silencing critics and governing through force and fear. For example, there have been an estimated [1,530](#) known cases of enforced disappearances from July 2013 to August 2018. These have caused the affected families' untold despairs as they are not told where their relatives are and if they will ever see them again. Events during el-Sisi's rise to power could have been foreboding to his style of management, as the massacre in Rab'a Square in Cairo in 2013 saw over [800](#) peaceful protestors killed in one day by security forces.

Number of executions



Oppression in the country has only grown more widespread, with freedom of speech not tolerated. The government has forced media organisations to toe the government line or be shut down. Activists and bloggers have also been silenced and jailed, and any accurate portrayal of el-Sisi's maladministration can be called an attempt 'to incite violence' according to new retrograde [laws](#) regulating

Number of protest related arrests by age (September 2019 protests)



Source: Egyptian Center for Economic & Social Rights

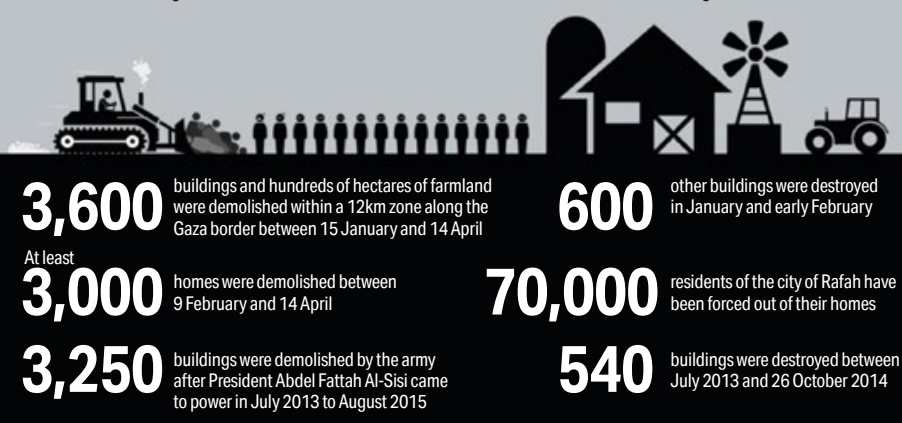
the media and the internet. These policies inherently contradict the stability rhetoric of el-Sisi, as his actions attest to otherwise and are only grounded on people's dread of his security services. The leaders, who pledge support to el-Sisi's rule, including the U.S. President Donald Trump, seem to have been misguided, as the desire for long-term stability in the region may not be actualised by having el-Sisi in power, with his deathly fear of dissent and media unsustainable. Case in point are the 2019 protests after contractor [Mohamed Ali](#) revealed the corruption of the military establishment. The usual response followed; sweeping arrests were made (see the chart above), websites were blocked, and various lawyers, activists and journalists were rounded up. What those protests did demonstrate, however, is that Egypt's population remains receptive and cracks do exist in el-Sisi's regime – as they did in Mubarak's – that will not be filled by a continuation of the status quo.

Furthermore, the el-Sisi's regime's response to activities in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula has been likewise oppressive. Military operations began in 2014 to ostensibly rid the area of Daesh-linked militants; however, the degradation of human rights in the region has been escalating ever since, and security forces act with impunity. For example, at least [3000](#) homes have been

destroyed in an attempt to evict inhabitants and clear the area unlawfully. These were done with no judicial orders, and no delineations of compensation have been made. In addition, security forces have committed various illegal acts including torture, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary mass arrests, with the HRW going as far as to call them war crimes. Cells for detainees are also inadequate and overcrowded, lacking water, food, and medical care. Furthermore, security forces have regularly failed to closely distinguish between combatants and civilians, leading to many unnecessary deaths. [In a report by HRW](#), they found evidence of the government counting killed civilians with combatants, and that hundreds of civilians had been wrongfully killed. In fact, while some of those were covertly executed in the desert, security forces said they had died in shootouts instead.

Egypt's Operation Sinai

In early 2018 Cairo announced that it was launching military action to rid its northern province of terrorist cells, however Human Rights Watch has seen evidence that it is the local residents that are being evicted.



Source: Open Street Map

Conclusion

In the ninth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, el-Sisi's regime has proven to be authoritarian and corrupt. It is also fragile, and the exasperated populace are again beginning to make their voices heard for democratic change. The domestic climate has only deteriorated under el-Sisi, and his rule has given rise to its own challenges and concerns.

The economic decline has been stark under his rule. External debt has increased five-fold, the Egyptian pound had depreciated, and public debt has doubled. Relatively strong growth rates have been propped up by extensive borrowing, and critical functions like infrastructure and health have been largely ignored. El-Sisi's government has a stranglehold on the private sector, and the IMF partnership has made austerity widespread. There is a lack of safety nets in Egypt, a situation further exacerbated by the government cutting subsidies. Egypt is also dependent on imports, with a GDP heavily reliant on consumption.

There is a myriad of social issues in modern Egypt. This includes poverty, with some 60% of Egypt's population is either poor or vulnerable. The official poverty line is one which many economists say is too low, and people are struggling to afford essential daily items. Inequality is another significant social issue, with Egypt the third most unequal country in the world, according to Credit Suisse. Inflation has worsened the effects of inequality as Egyptians have lower earnings, purchasing power, and living standards than they did three years ago after adjusting for inflation. Demographics is also a social issue faced, and the UN estimates Egypt's population will reach 200m by 2100. A considerable segment of the population is

composed of youth, and the unemployment rate amongst them is very high; there are a lack of good, steady jobs and the education system serves them poorly.

The degradation of human rights in Egypt has also gotten only worse since the revolution. Thousands are in jail on trumped-up charges, and there is a lack of due process. Many die in prison or custody, and enforced disappearance is a method extensively used by the government. Freedom of speech is not tolerated, and Egypt ranks 161 out of 180 countries in press freedom. While el-Sisi's regime wants to give off the impression of stability, its policies are grounded on fear and are unsustainable in the long-term. Some of its response to activities in Sinai has also amounted to war crimes according to HRW, with homes demolished and civilians killed with impunity as the government does not accurately distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Overall, el-Sisi's lack of expertise and ruthless grip on power has led to many deaths, arrests, and disappearances. The economy is propped up on loans and has worsened, as has the status of various social issues including poverty, inequality, healthcare, and the education system. However, the 2011 revolution's main hope of democratic change, while predictably not coming to fruition under el-Sisi, has not been extinguished. The people were always in it for the long run, needing to begin somewhere to allow the slow democratic processes to swing into gear. They have already proved that change is possible, and the first step is often the hardest. Ultimately, with people increasingly frustrated, when what is remaining of Egypt's social institutions begins to fall apart, el-Sisi's house of cards is likely to follow.



A demonstrator holds a banner reading "Free Egypt, Denounce the Bloody Military Coup - 40,000 Detainees Without Charge, Children, Girls, Youth - Anti-Coup" during a protest marking the fourth anniversary of Rabaa El Adaweya massacre in Times Square of Manhattan borough of New York, United States on August 13, 2017. Rabaa El Adaweya massacre took place on the 14th of August, 2013 killing hundreds after the military takeover in Egypt. (Mohammed Elshamy - Anadolu Agency)