

Egypt's Bitter Options in the Face of Coronavirus

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Brief Analysis

In early April, demonstrations erupted in the village of al-Hayatem in Egypt's Nile Delta to protest the decision to impose a lockdown on the village after the appearance of cases of COVID-19 there. The scene was chaotic and even absurd as security forces wavered between a desire to follow orders to disperse the protestors and a fear of catching the virus—they were left completely paralyzed, not knowing what to do. This showdown represents a terrifying quandary for the Egyptian state, which for many decades has been accustomed to resorting to security solutions to deal with political and social crises. The problem here is that this is essentially a health crisis—should it explode (God forbid), the usual security response will prove ineffective, if not virtually futile.

Mostafa Madbouly, who assumed the position of Prime Minister in June 2018, is like most heads of government that have held power in Egypt since Gamal Abdel Nasser and his comrades transformed the country into a republic in 1952. In theory, they are heads of government, while in practice; they are implementers of the president's agenda. But a dramatic shift in Madbouly's political role came last March when Egypt was hit by a rainstorm, an event that coincided with the complete disappearance of the country's president. This gave Madbouly the opportunity to emerge as the face of the government in managing the crisis, breaking from the modus operandi of former presidents amid a sea of rumors about why [Sisi \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/sisis-election-challenges-in-2018\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/sisis-election-challenges-in-2018) was nowhere to be found.

The prime minister's competent and level-headed handling of the flood crisis garnered praise from many opponents of the regime. While objections and reservations were raised from some quarters, the performance of his government created a considerably positive impression overall with Madbouly himself experiencing a moderate rise in popularity. As the coronavirus pandemic began spreading across the country, Madbouly remained for a time at the helm of the government's response. Rumors continued to grow surrounding the reason behind Sisi's disappearing act until March 22, when the prime minister reemerged as the nation celebrated Egyptian Women's Day, announcing a package of economic measures to address the coronavirus crisis.

Of course, the situation in Egypt, with all its political turmoil and [limited economic capabilities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Egypt-Economy-The-Next-Challenge-for-the-Regime\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Egypt-Economy-The-Next-Challenge-for-the-Regime), cannot be compared to that of developed countries or the wealthy kingdoms of the Middle East.

Nonetheless, it has become increasingly clear that there are two fundamental problems in the way the country is

handling this health crisis, which have come to overshadow the initially optimistic prospects of the Madbouly government.

The First Problem: Transparency

Successive regimes in Egypt have consistently concealed facts and information from the people with the result that many remain distrustful of government data (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypt-coronavirus-denial-conspiracy-COVID-pandemic>). Yet in the face of the coronavirus outbreak, it is all the more important for Egyptians to be able to believe official statements on the health and economic situation in their country. This requires complete disclosure, which is incompatible with ignoring simple and reasonable questions like: Why did the president disappear for so long? Were the three generals who died the only ones infected with coronavirus, or were there other cases of infection among army commanders? How many ventilators and equipped beds does Egypt have available?

Here, the problem of a lack of transparency is that the coronavirus represents a society-wide crisis, one which is impossible to tackle without the full compliance of Egyptians with the preventive instructions issued by the state. Yet this compliance cannot come about unless there is an acceptable level of trust in the government. The absence of transparency or uncertainty regarding its existence creates a general impression that those in power hide the facts and lie to the public.

This impression has been reinforced a number of times since the crisis began. In a statement made in early March, the Ministry of Health spokesperson declared that “there are no actual or suspected cases of corona in Egypt” at a time when the virus had already entered most of the surrounding countries. In early April, at the Oncology Hospital in Cairo, the hospital director at first denied there were any cases of the virus among his staff, then later returned and admitted that infections had in fact been detected. While this individual director’s behavior may have stemmed from his personal beliefs rather than from government directives, it no doubt strengthened the feeling among Egyptians that the state is withholding facts from them.

The Second Problem: Priorities

President Sisi’s package of measures to deal with the coronavirus crisis reveals that the economy is currently the primary concern of the Egyptian state. This explains why the government exempted factory workers, construction companies, and film production crews from the curfew imposed in Egypt. However, the government seems only to be supporting large entities, not small businesses. For example, when the president decided to postpone bank loan installments, the central bank excluded small business owners from this deferral, further solidifying the image of a state that neglects its lowest-income citizens when they need help the most.

The risks posed by this economic crisis—framed by some in terms of “the economy versus human life”—cannot be understated. Yet there remains the question of why the president would reappear after a long absence to talk about a government plan for confronting what is essentially a health crisis, only to focus entirely on the economy without mentioning even a sentence on combating the virus itself. This points to an imbalance in state priorities, especially in light of Egypt’s dilapidated health system and undeniable shortage of ventilators. Sisi chose to pump the Egyptian Exchange with 20 billion pounds instead of directing those funds toward purchasing medical devices, a seemingly incomprehensible move that Egypt may regret if the coronavirus becomes widespread in the country. Some have angrily accused the government of caring more about the economy than its people.

For now, the situation in Egypt appears to be less dangerous than in other countries. This does not mean, however, that Egypt is safe or that the pandemic will not spread within the country, especially considering the behavior of a government apparatus that Egyptians cannot easily trust or rely on for support. A reassuringly clear health response plan must therefore be prepared—in accordance, of course, with the country’s limited capabilities—to combat the

virus if it spreads. In the absence of such a plan to date, some have called for a grassroots campaign to manufacture ventilators. While this effort is no doubt to be lauded, the government still bears the greatest responsibility for confronting the virus.

What is clear is that the government's position is very difficult and its resources are all fraught with risks. On the one hand, Egypt cannot implement a complete lockdown, which would further stifle the market in a country where the majority of people suffer from economic hardship. Moreover, bringing the economy to a standstill could lead to nationwide unrest. On the other hand, if gatherings are permitted, the disease may spread, leading to an increase in deaths—here, congested streets caused by stifling economic circumstances would be the perfect recipe for disaster. If the health crisis were to explode, fear of the virus mixed with anti-government discontent could lead to a recurrence of what happened in the village of al-Hayatem across all of Egypt: groups of angry citizens coming out onto the streets only to be met with security forces who are uncertain of how to deal with them.

All options on the table are bitter and the current situation is highly sensitive and complicated. The Egyptian people will not tolerate a prolonged lockdown, nor a pandemic that claims thousands of lives—the government thus has no choice but to walk a tightrope between two potentially volatile scenarios. This will require the **Sisi administration** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/revelatory-elections-a-state-of-divide-and-rule>) to exercise maximum transparency, openness, and a logical ordering of priorities. ❖

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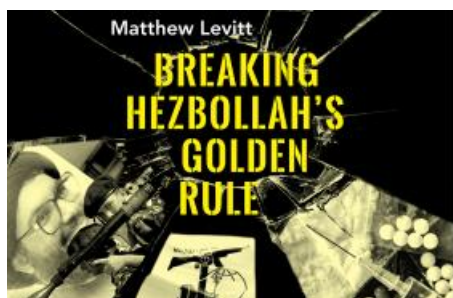
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