



# The Road to Egypt's 6th of October

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Angie Omar is a journalist based in Washington D.C. She began her career as a citizen journalist in the Arab Spring in Egypt. Shortly after, she moved to the United States and received her master's degree in communications from the American University in Washington D.C. She has researched and produced projects for non-profits, think tanks, television, and radio stations.



### Brief Analysis

**E**gypt, with all its variety, novelty, and antiquity, also happens to have a sophisticated Uber service. On a quick Uber trip from Cairo's Abdeen neighborhood to the 6th of October city in Giza governorate, I had the chance to ride with a 59-year-old Egyptian driver who brought to the conversation an underreported but vital perspective on the hidden costs of Egypt's drive to develop megacities and megaprojects. Both the conversation and the trip itself highlighted Egypt's challenging history with these developmental marvels, and how the system's appetite for these projects leaves regular Egyptians behind.

We began a conversation on the past hopes of Egyptians for our country. He remarked, "It's a shame what's been done to us after the revolution." I noted that it had already been eight years since the Arab Spring, but he clarified that he had actually been referring to the 1952 revolution, which ended the Egyptian monarchy established by the British in the wake of the colonial period.

Mr. Waheed reminisced how everyone—from politicians to the media—had convinced Egyptians that the 1952 revolution had freed Egypt. But Gamal Abdel-Naser, who rose to power in the wake of the revolution, also innovated another Egyptian tradition that would emphasize Egyptian grandeur while providing little real benefit for the country's citizens. Nasser was the first autocrat to focus state resources on developing complex infrastructure projects like the Aswan dam—promising that these projects were the key to the country's economic development.

Today, Egypt's cash-poor government continues to follow in Nasser's footsteps, building high-cost megaprojects while drowning Egypt into greater debt. The scale of today's megaprojects raises the question:

### **Where does the average citizen fall in this calculation?**

Mr. Waheed had brought up the economic promise of those old megaprojects to contrast its vision with the current social stratification so evident between Abdeen and 6th of October in Giza. As he put it: "try to preserve the image here in Abdeen as we go to 6th of October, notice the transition and compare life here with life there... I go to 6th of

October as a stranger to drop off people who usually live in gated communities surrounded by security. Only money protects you in this country; not your citizenship or even taxes.” It is clear what Mr. Waheed hoped to bring to my attention: the social stratification of Egypt is highly visible by simply comparing the two locales.

Mr. Waheed’s request to look to the streets reflects a longstanding association between the Egyptian government and Cairo’s urban architecture.

But in Abdeen, the smell of history and corruption are inseparable. Litter pockmarks every corner of the city. The faces of street children show the exhaustion of their reality while they sell prickly pears to fancy vehicles. I was able to coax a smile from one child when I bought a plate of prickly pears from her, after which she danced her way back to the car behind us.

Conversely, the 6th of October is one of Egypt’s megacities, consisting mainly of gated communities and other luxury housing. The city was established in 1979 by the 504th presidential decree of President Anwar el-Sadat in order to honor the Egyptian soldiers killed in the 6th of October war in 1973. Its link to greater Cairo is the 26th of July Corridor—once called the King Farouk corridor and changed after the bloodless coup of 1952.

Yet the further from the center of Cairo one travels, the more closely slums, informal settlements, and the toxic air that Cairenes have accustomed themselves to for decades come into sharper focus. The life that the 6th of October provides to its occupants is a mirage when compared to the challenges of the Egyptians living right outside of it.

A portrait of Egypt’s social stratification is also sharply visible through the routes and urban design. The routes and highways that provide service to the elite of the country—though never publicly mentioned in presidential agendas—appear carefully designed and implemented to maintain social division in Egypt. Meanwhile, the continued construction of megacities have been raising Egypt’s external debt and playing a crucial part in the systematic discrimination against people based on their wealth and the level of power they hold in the government.

The poverty so obvious on Egyptian streets raises the question of why the system insists on continuing to construct urban agglomerations to accommodate the wealthy, since these efforts help maintain the social gap between citizens, deliberately eliminating the middle-class and contributing to Egypt’s chronic poverty. The classic answer, as Mr. Waheed notes, is that Egyptians are told that the megaprojects are necessary for Egypt to “keep up with the spirit of the civilized world.”

Bent Flyvbjerg, an expert in project management at Oxford’s business school, is able to describe the megaproject’s intrinsic appeal to stakeholder: engineers are delighted to develop new technology, politicians revel in the visibility they gain from building monuments associated with themselves, and everyone else—developers, bankers, lawyers, consultants, landowners, contractors, and construction workers—are happy to claim a share of the monetary windfall.

However, Egypt’s current state clearly shows that megaprojects fail to live up to the promises of the politicians behind them. And Flyvbjerg emphasizes that megacities that cost \$1 billion or more must go over budget even in the size of New York’s economy, and notes in an article in the *Project Management Journal* that nine out of ten megaprojects are over budget, and most take much longer to build than expected. To take a famous example, it took over a decade for New York just to begin the \$3.9 billion project to rebuild the 59-year-old Tappan Zee bridge, and the ongoing cost of maintenance keeps increasing.

When it comes to recent megaprojects in Egypt, the expansion of the Suez Canal is a prime example: the expansion was targeted to bring in \$13 billion annually by 2023 instead of \$5 billion, the current average annual income of the canal. However, the government did not consider the current slowdown in global economic trade, and consequently the New Canal is unlikely to bring its fruits in the near future. Some experts even claim that in order for the Canal to achieve its designated target (\$13 billion annually by 2023); the global trade has to grow by 9 percent annually until

2023.

Flyybjerg's study affirms Mr. Waheed's sense as a native Cairine that complex projects in a developing country like Egypt end up placing an undue burden on the city itself mainly providing benefits for the city's elites. In Mr. Waheed's case, while also an uber driver, he served as a math teacher for over 37 years. Now he is required to retire at 60 with a pension of 1100 Egyptian Pounds (about \$67 dollars). While the government economists loudly claim that the Egyptian economy is doing the best it has in decades, Mr. Waheed and others like him must struggle to figure out how to live on such a small sum.

The trip also raised the question of an alternative future: what if Egypt's development designers recognized their total failure in achieving economic and political stability through repeated failed megaprojects? What if the Egyptian military releases the country's economy from its grip and allows private initiatives and fair competition to develop? What if the system realizes that freeing the educational curricula of social discrimination and hatred would foster better cultural cohesion?

As Mr. Waheed put it, those in power "always make this country seems stable when in fact it's boiling up." And in terms of the young unemployed men and women sitting aimlessly in coffee shops, "not one of them understands why they aren't working on the projects that [are supposed to] keep Egypt with the spirit of civilized world." ❖



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