

Collective Memory of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution: Surveying Egyptians a Decade After

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Brief Analysis

A recent poll gauges Egyptians' lasting impressions of their chapter in the Arab Spring.

In 2011, after just eighteen days, from January 25 to February 11, the Egyptian public overthrew the 30-year-long dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. A decade afterwards, we sought to have Egyptians reflect on the collective memory of those days. What fueled the revolution? Was it successful? Did it lose its way? [Attempts to explain the Revolution in public discourse point to inequality, economic stagnation, poverty, unemployment, and corruption \(https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/feb/17/what-caused-egyptian-revolution\)](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/feb/17/what-caused-egyptian-revolution). Reflecting on these indicators, we compare them to Egyptians' own recollections through the analysis of an exploratory survey conducted in November 2020.

The Inadequacy of Economic Explanations

Within the Egyptian public discourse, the term “inequality” encompasses multiple dimensions, such as economic and social status, the urban and rural divide, the distribution of resources and services, and access to opportunities at large. For example, the think tank [The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies \(http://www.eces.org.eg/Archives?Lang=EN&C=8&T=1&Y=2011&M=5\)](http://www.eces.org.eg/Archives?Lang=EN&C=8&T=1&Y=2011&M=5) suggested that “social inequality and inadequate human development coupled with the lack of political reforms have been among the main factors that led to the outbreak of the revolution.” Since 2011, post-revolution governments have implemented various programs aimed at redressing inequality like [a development infrastructure plan in the poorest 1,000 villages \(https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10738egypt.pdf\)](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10738egypt.pdf) in 2016.

Economic stagnation has also been credited as a factor. However, Egypt's Gross Domestic Product (**GDP annual growth rate** (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/EG>)) stagnated to a maximum of 5% from 2012 onward, after a steady rate of 7% over the 2001-2011 period. This suggests a better economic outlook before rather than after the revolution.

The impact of poverty appears to have decreased rather than increased in the period before the revolution. **The World Bank** (<http://wdi.worldbank.org/tables>) sets a daily income of \$5.50 a day as a baseline for poverty in upper-middle-income countries, based on an internationally priced basket of goods. In 2008, 75 percent of the Egyptian population lived below that poverty line. In 2010, just before the revolution, this proportion had decreased to 68 percent. By 2017, it had again risen to more than 70 percent. Similarly, unemployment rates have also risen since the Revolution. In 2010, **the unemployment rate in Egypt** (<http://wdi.worldbank.org/tables>) was around 8.75 percent. By 2013, it topped 13 percent amid continuing civil conflict and political instability, including the June 2013 mass protests and ensuing deposition of President Mohamed Morsi. In late 2020, the unemployment rate soared back to above 10 percent amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The final issue often credited for sparking the revolution is corruption. It is notoriously difficult to assess corruption in Egypt precisely because of the lack of government transparency, both before and after the revolution. The data available comes from **a global index of corruption perceptions** (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019>) published by the NGO Transparency International over the 2015-2018 period. This index is standardized to a scale of 0-100, wherein 0 indicates the highest level and 100 indicates the lowest level of perceived corruption. Over the 2015-2018 period, Egypt's score was 35, which is below the world median. While this statistic reveals a subpar performance in addressing corruption, we cannot assess whether it contributed to the Revolution.

Personal Recollections

In late 2020, the first author conducted a survey to explore Egyptians' own recollections of the 2011 revolution. The motivation was to investigate how today's Egyptian citizens perceive the causes and consequences of the revolution, and to think about how personal experiences reflect or contradict the international public discourse surrounding the Egyptian revolution. Our method was exploratory, aiming to obtain information from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a sample representative of the total population. The first author recruited 32 adults living in Cairo through snowball sampling. The survey questionnaire was translated into Arabic and conducted in person, over the phone, and via social media.

Respondents form a heterogeneous group in religion, worldviews and political attitudes, gender, age, educational background, employment status, and income. 21 respondents identify as Muslim and 11 as Christian. Now, considering the crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood since 2013, the survey makes no mention of that group, for the sake of research ethics (respondents might feel unsafe or uncomfortable) as well as survey validity (allegiance might be underestimated). Instead, respondents were asked whether they consider themselves secular (n=19) or religious (n=13).

Similarly, since party systems in revolutionary and post-revolutionary states are characteristically unstable, the survey asked about political ideology rather than party identification. By that measure, 16 respondents are liberal and 12 are conservative. On sociodemographic dimensions, 19 respondents identify as men and 13 as women. At the time of the revolution, six were under 18, 11 were aged 18 to 34, 12 were aged 35 to 54, and two were over 55. Nine completed high school, 13 have an undergraduate degree, and 10 have a graduate degree. 17 were employed at the time of the revolution, 10 were unemployed, and five were in school. Three consider their family poor, nine low-income, 11 middle-income, and nine high-income.

Overall, 21 respondents participated in the 2011 revolution, whereas 11 did not. Participation crossed the political spectrum, concerning 6 out of 12 conservatives and 13 out of 16 liberals, as well as stances on the role of religion in public life, as 8 out of 13 religious respondents and 14 out of 19 secular respondents participated. Interestingly, 9 out of 11 non-participants felt that the revolution was supported by foreign actors, compared to 5 out of 21 participants. Non-participants likely used the foreign influence as a justification for rejecting the revolution.

All participants cited “economic justice” and “social justice” as the reasons why they got involved, and 19 (i.e., all but two) also referred to “corruption” and “democracy”. These personal motives are similar to those mentioned in public discourse. For the forms of participation, all but one participants attended a protest or rally. 16 participated in person and 16 utilized digital media. For context, in 2010, there were 70.66 million unique mobile phone users (<https://mcit.gov.eg/>) for a population of 82.76 million, and the role of digital media (<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1180>) in the 2011 Egyptian revolution and in the Arab Spring (<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199936953.001.0001>) generally has been extensively documented.

Eight respondents believe that the revolution achieved its goals, 12 believe it achieved some, and 12 believe it achieved none. On a personal level, half (n=17) of the respondents say that their life has stayed the same; in other words, the revolution has not affected their living standards. The other half is evenly split on whether their life used to be better before the revolution (n=7) or is better now (n=8). Still, just a quarter of respondents report improved living standards, and three-quarters perceive that the problems that led to the revolution persist.

Lastly, respondents were invited to a thought experiment: if they could go back in time, would they support the 2011 revolution? 10 say yes, eight say maybe, and a resounding 14 say no. Note, also, an income gradient in disillusionment. Whereas all poor respondents say they would still support it, two out of nine low-income respondents, five out of 11 middle-income respondents, and seven out of nine high-income respondents say they would *not* support it, now that they know the aftermath.

Conclusion

Of course, our exploratory survey of 32 Cairenes’ recollections of the 2011 revolution is neither conclusive nor generalizable. Nevertheless, its analysis yields two takeaways, and two potential implications for theory and policy. First, the personal recollections we surveyed broadly mirror the sources of dissent identified in public discourse and supported by indicative evidence: inequality, economic stagnation, poverty, unemployment, and corruption. Second, the injustices that fueled discontent in the first place have endured to this day.

Yet paradoxically, in our sample, it is the economically advantaged who feel most disappointed about the revolution now a decade later. Theoretically, this unravels the structural processes—especially issues of economic and social inequality, actual and perceived—that give rise to revolutionary attitudes. Practically, this highlights that in Egypt, sudden political change did not come with sweeping social change, failing citizen aspirations. Hence, by failing to tackle the root causes of social development, civil conflict and political instability are likely to continue.

Moreover, within the Egyptian collective memory, the 2011 revolution may become codified as the onset of a roller-coaster of hopes betrayed and dreams deferred—not the definitive democratic moment that the revolutionists envisioned. Going forward, a collective sentiment of disillusion and apathy will likely be the shared perspective of this moment in Egyptian history, cutting across those conflicting views of what the 2011 revolution represented and who was involved. ❖

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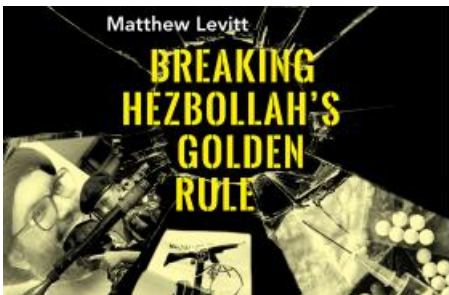
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