

Bread in Egypt: Politics, Social Unrest, and State Stability

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Brief Analysis

The global rise in wheat prices since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has renewed questions about Egypt's bread subsidies and the government's broader legitimacy.

On May 3, the Egyptian government [denied rumors \(https://www.elaosboa.com/896318/\)](https://www.elaosboa.com/896318/) that it plans to hike the price of subsidized bread. The need for such denials springs from a basic reality: bread is the primary source of calories for most Egyptians. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine causing worldwide wheat prices to jump, understanding how this issue affects political, economic, and social stability in Egypt has become a more pressing matter for policymakers and analysts. A deep dive into relevant Egyptian media coverage provides some surprising answers, including the realization that President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's repressive apparatus cannot mask the state's failure to provide for its citizens.

Sisi Under Pressure

On the surface, Sisi appears to exercise an iron grip over Egyptian politics and society. Since 2013, he has sought to hobble trade unions, eliminate the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood once and for all, and recruit Salafi Muslim factions to support him as the rightful ruler. Eager to position himself as the Gamal Abdul Nasser of the twenty-first century, he has embarked on the [Egypt Vision 2030 initiative \(https://www.presidency.gov/en/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1/%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-2030/\)](https://www.presidency.gov/en/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1/%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-2030/), which includes a new multi-billion-dollar capital city on the outskirts of Cairo, complete with a new presidential palace and ministry compounds.

Despite Sisi's strong grip, however, Egypt's social contract is [under extreme pressure \(https://nationalinterest.org/feature/egypt-headed-toward-collapse-206453\)](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/egypt-headed-toward-collapse-206453) owing to population growth, ballooning national debt, and a declining currency. The government supplies subsidized bread to [nearly 80 percent \(https://mcit.gov.eg/upcont/Documents/Reports%20and%20Documents_2092021000_EN_Egypt_Human_Development_Report_2021.pdf\)](https://mcit.gov.eg/upcont/Documents/Reports%20and%20Documents_2092021000_EN_Egypt_Human_Development_Report_2021.pdf) of Egypt's 100 million residents, but the cost of purchasing the necessary wheat has risen by [roughly 40 percent \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-raises-local-wheat-procurement-price-44-amid-inflation-2023-01-18/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-raises-local-wheat-procurement-price-44-amid-inflation-2023-01-18/) during the Ukraine war. In response, the government has [reduced the amount of subsidized food \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-10/egypt-cuts-subsidized-food-allocations-to-battle-economic-crisis?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-10/egypt-cuts-subsidized-food-allocations-to-battle-economic-crisis?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner) Egyptians can receive—while simultaneously [increasing its planned spending \(https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/6498434\)](https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/6498434) on food subsidies by 20 percent for fiscal year 2023/24. This apparent disconnect reflects the seriousness of Egypt's economic issues. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the current domestic crisis is solely a matter of economic dissatisfaction. Rather, its potency is rooted in the explicit and implicit critiques of the state's competence and legitimacy that have arisen in response to mounting economic problems.

When You Can't Talk Politics, Talk Bread

The struggle to maintain the subsidies system is not new. Memorably, when the Sadat government decided to cut bread subsidies in 1977 as part of debt-reduction negotiations with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, widespread protests broke out. Although the demonstrations were most proximally tied to bread prices, they also reflected a widening gulf between the promises and realities of the post-1952 social contract forged under Nasser. Today, food debates remain a powerful lens through which to view public perceptions of the state's failures.

For their part, Sisi and his allies continue to downplay the extent and causes of the economic challenge. In a January appearance to celebrate

Police Day, Sisi [asked the media rhetorically \(https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2800447\)](https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2800447): “Why do you depict Egyptians as if they are panicked and fearful over food and drink?...I am not saying [there are no economic challenges], but not being able to eat and drink is not the end of the world.” Such tone-deaf statements reflect Sisi’s [self-narrative of modest origins \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLQNqtZei4\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLQNqtZei4), which includes the claim that water was once the sole item in his refrigerator for years. He also claims that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is what [disrupted Egypt’s previously “healthy” economy \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A).

Last December, the government’s campaign to justify the status quo even led the Ministry of Health and Population to promote [chicken feet and cattle hooves \(https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2022/12/28/egypt-natl-nutrition-institute-promotes-benefits-of-eating-chicken-feet/\)](https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2022/12/28/egypt-natl-nutrition-institute-promotes-benefits-of-eating-chicken-feet/) as a source of protein. The ministry was later revealed to have [posted a doctored photo \(https://twitter.com/matsda2sh/status/1606951330240778240\)](https://twitter.com/matsda2sh/status/1606951330240778240) showing international soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo happily eating chicken feet. The incident also sparked an [Al Jazeera segment \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klT6gM980Qc\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klT6gM980Qc) documenting social media responses to the ministry’s campaign, including sarcastic speculation that Cairo would soon be promoting worms as a free protein source.

Elsewhere, [the Muslim Brotherhood’s recent critiques \(https://ikhwan.site/p-222609\)](https://ikhwan.site/p-222609) of Sisi have focused not just on political repression, but also on his government’s failure to manage economic affairs. To be sure, the Brotherhood has been increasingly marginalized in recent years as a political force. Yet damaging critiques are also emerging from one of its key opposition rivals, the Salafis, who first emerged as political powerbrokers beginning in 2011.

The vast majority of Egyptian Salafis are quietist and thus refuse to explicitly comment on the state’s policies or legitimacy. Yet their critiques of the status quo are powerful not because they target Sisi directly, but because they reject the state’s ambitions to define citizens’ lives. In [a statement \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCDuub1GXp8\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCDuub1GXp8) posted to YouTube in January, Salafi scholar Mustafa al-Adawi declared that the solution to Egypt’s economic problems lay in returning to God. Similarly, Muhammad Said Raslan—a Salafi figure who graduated from the government-controlled Al-Azhar religious university and is particularly popular in Egypt’s rural areas—[declared last year \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBpENXgWHxA\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBpENXgWHxA) that “high bread prices are the result of sin...[People] must repent and seek forgiveness from God.”

Attempts to connect food prices and sin are not novel: for example, one [popular sticker \(https://twitter.com/Monashry/status/1177333351700664321\)](https://twitter.com/Monashry/status/1177333351700664321) found on subway cars, elevators, and buses since the Mubarak era reads, “High prices will not cease until women cover themselves.” Yet such moral arguments have become more far-reaching of late. In response, Sisi’s religious allies within Al-Azhar have been unable to do much [besides declare \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELkDXXyG77Q\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELkDXXyG77Q) that rising bread prices serve the common good for Muslims because cheaper bread would be used to make alcoholic beverages.

The Salafi statements may sound like religious attempts to use the economic crisis as a means of renewing followers’ commitment to the faith, but that assumption misunderstands the Salafi quietist code. Put simply, their focus on an explicit solution—repentance—cloaks the broader message, namely, that the world is shaped not by the state, but by adherence to Allah. This message appears apolitical because it avoids attacking the government, yet it is profoundly subversive because it positions God as sovereign over economic life and Salafi religious authorities as the guides to proper conduct. And while Salafis may be politically loyal to Sisi at the moment, they will not hesitate to align themselves with another leader in the event his rule is threatened or upended.

Policy Recommendations

Significant restrictions on public expression cannot mask the fact that Egypt is once again showing signs of the broad dissatisfaction that sparked its Arab Spring movement a decade ago. Current economic conditions pose risks to the legitimacy and stability of Sisi’s government, leading [many to ask \(https://twitter.com/AlyHussinMahdy/status/1628454047488348162\)](https://twitter.com/AlyHussinMahdy/status/1628454047488348162) whether a “revolution of the hungry” (*thawrat al-giya*) is on the horizon. And just as Tunisia’s turmoil spread to the rest of the region in 2010-11, the current potential for spillover from Egypt is significant.

To prevent a chaotic collapse, the United States has the capacity to help stabilize Egypt’s social contract. The most pressing policy challenge is to reduce the price of bread while continuing to press Cairo on implementing the reforms outlined in its latest IMF program. Accordingly, officials from Washington and the IMF should work with Sisi’s government on ways to hold down costs for Egyptians, yet also limit the waste and distortions that cheap (i.e., subsidized) bread can have on the production of substitute foodstuffs. No other measures would be as effective in shoring up governmental and social stability. Although U.S. concerns about the Sisi government’s human rights record should not be cast aside, the more pressing matter is to avoid a downward spiral that results in even greater humanitarian suffering.

Of course, how best to hold down the price of bread is a complex question with no easy answers. There are three main alternatives for handling the immediate problem: price controls with the associated risk of shortages; direct financial subsidies to the Egyptian government, with the associated risks of corruption; or subsidizing wheat deliveries, whether from Ukraine (which may have the bonus effect of supporting its war effort), from the United States (which may benefit American farmers), or from elsewhere. Each approach has political and economic costs, but

given the situation's growing urgency, the simplest response—sending cash to Cairo—may be the only way to avoid an explosion. In the longer term, however, the next bread crisis will be waiting just around the corner unless Egypt implements significant economic reforms.

Aaron Rock-Singer is a historian of the Middle East with a focus on Egypt and Islamic movements. His publications include In the Shade of the Sunna: Salafi Piety in the Twentieth-Century Middle East (University of California Press, 2022). ❖

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