

Egypt's Protests Are a Beacon of Hope

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The recent protests demanding the fall of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi were Egypt's largest since the 2013 military coup. Years of repression have devastated the organized opposition and its networks — but a fresh revolt by Egyptian youth has shown that the regime is anything but secure.

On September 20, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in Cairo and a number of provincial towns, calling for the departure of the country's military dictator, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The protest was a rare one, at a time where at least [sixty thousand political prisoners](#) are languishing in jails, political parties have been destroyed or otherwise contained, civil liberties are completely stifled, and [torture](#) is endemic.

Street dissent prior to these protests had almost been dead, due to the severe repression. Last time a relatively significant protest occurred it was merely a couple thousand demonstrators, mainly in Cairo, in the [spring of 2016](#), against Sisi's handover of [two strategic islands](#) in the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia.

The state reacted to the protests in what has become the fashion following the 2013 military coup. Telecommunications were disrupted; websites were censored. More than three thousand people were [arrested](#), activists' homes were raided, [lawyers](#) and [dissidents](#) were kidnapped and [tortured](#), and both privately run and state-owned media issued a hysterical wave of defamation against protesters.

Why Did People Protest?

In recent weeks Egyptians have been gripped by videos posted on Facebook by Mohamed Ali, a forty-five-year-old actor and a former construction contractor with close ties to the Egyptian army. After quietly leaving for Spain around a year ago, on September 2 Ali went public with details of the corrupt practices among army generals, Sisi's family, and his inner circle.

Though military corruption is common knowledge among average Egyptians, the public still gasped as they learned details of how Sisi and his entourage [squandered billions of Egyptian pounds](#) on white elephant projects and luxurious palaces and hotels. This was particularly striking at a time when [austerity measures](#) are being applied on steroids and Sisi regularly talks about how "poor" the country is.

In a sudden move, Ali used his platform to call on Egyptians to take to the streets "in the millions" on September 20, claiming that the army and the police "will stand with the people" and that Sisi's days are numbered.

Given the buzz around Mohamed Ali, theories thrived on social media — and in private gatherings — as to who was really "behind" him. Rumors also circulated en masse about supposed "divisions within the security services." It was alleged that the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (*al-Mukhabarat al-Amma*) is staffed with angry anti-Sisi officers and that they stand ready to support

the protesters and Sisi's removal. This was not a sign of love for the military or the *Mukhabarat*, as much as evidence of the level of desperation Egyptians have reached after the demise of all political alternatives in such draconian times.

Indeed, not a single political party endorsed Ali's call for protests. This was not necessarily due to skepticism toward Ali, as much as the fact that most political parties and activist networks have been crushed by Sisi's continuous crackdowns.

The spontaneous demonstrations that broke out on September 20 took everyone by surprise, and in general none of the veteran political activists participated.

Those who took to the streets in Cairo and the provinces were largely teenagers and youth, with little political experience and no organizational affiliations. The protesters were met with tear gas, police violence, and mass arrests.

However, in the northern industrial city of Suez — where the spark of the January 25, 2011 revolution was ignited — protesters battled the police for two days. In one remarkable incident, a pro-regime tycoon who owns a ceramics factory gathered his workers to go out on a march in support of Sisi. The [workers](#) assembled in the factory, but soon started to chant against the dictator: "Leave! Leave!"

In the end, there was to be no move by the military — and the police most certainly did not stand by the protesters. Yet Ali decided to call for another wave of protests the following Friday, September 27. No one heeded the call in Cairo, or in other big centers, and only a handful of protesters marched in two southern cities.

Why Did the Protests Fizzle Out?

It was, indeed, almost impossible for the protests to continue. The sheer scale of repression that followed September 20 acted as a deterrent. Not only did the regime round up more than three thousand protesters, while also deploying police troops and plainclothes security personnel to besiege all the major squares in Cairo and elsewhere, but they also instructed celebrities, government civil servants, and factory workers (mobilized using bribes and threats) to [demonstrate](#) simultaneously in support of Sisi.

Following the September 20 protests, there was also a level of disappointment among the public and disillusionment with Ali's rhetoric about supposed infighting in the security services and the army's alleged intention to depose Sisi. This was a [farce](#) from the beginning. Yet the belief that the army and the police were mulling Sisi's removal really had encouraged some to take part in the protests.

More importantly, in order for spontaneous protests to continue, organization is needed to sustain such a movement in the streets, to coordinate it and articulate a political alternative. Spontaneity does not last for long and is not enough to overthrow a regime. In effect, since the military coup in July 2013 Sisi has managed to destroy all organizational structures that could play that role: political parties, independent unions, youth organizations, and so on. And it was no coincidence that following the mass arrests of protesters, the security services immediately shifted their attention to veteran activists and leading members of political parties who were still at large, even when they had played no role in the mobilization.

In response to the popular discontent, the regime also rushed to assert its [fight against corruption](#) and restored [food subsidies](#) to nearly two million Egyptians. Its propagandists also hinted that there are to be some "political reforms" in the near future. Judging by the continuous targeting and torture of opposition figures, and the ban on street dissent, such reforms are not coming anytime

soon.

The Future?

Sisi's legitimacy is eroding. His popularity has plummeted compared to what it was in the hot summer days of the July 2013 coup, when he promised stability, security, and economic prosperity during turbulent, uncertain times following the 2011 revolution. He delivered none.

This does not necessarily mean he can easily be ousted by the online calls for protests by Ali or other opposition figures. And a military coup is unlikely in the meantime. Sisi and his two sons maintain their grip on the different security services, and the army leadership remain loyal and their privileges are protected and served, even when their counterinsurgency campaign in [Sinai](#) had proved to be a catastrophic failure.

The defeat of the Egyptian revolution by Sisi's military coup and the ensuing [dirty war](#) have had their toll on the activist networks and entities that could mobilize in the streets and in workplaces. The recovery will take time and effort, and the regional upheavals in Sudan, Algeria, and elsewhere help act as a catalyst via the domino effect. If revolution is an [accumulative process](#), the September protests were a leap forward in that process.

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