

Neoliberal Economic Policies and the 'Arab Spring': Searching for Deeper Explanations of Revolution and Economic Alternatives in Egypt

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Within the context of the 'Arab Spring' there is now a heightened interest in understanding the historical roots of these political upheavals. As such, research increasingly has pointed to the role of internal and external factors and triggers. These have included the unprecedented role of new social networks and the political repression and disenfranchisement of young people. Some writers have also acknowledged the contribution of high food prices and rising wealth gaps as important factors.

However, research has not yet adequately linked the 'Arab Spring' with the underlying policy frameworks in these countries. Many commentators had lauded the economic achievements of the many Middle Eastern governments, including Egypt, over the course of the 2000s. The IMF and World Bank were particularly congratulatory of Egypt's high growth rates and associated neoliberal policy adoption. Even when weaknesses in terms of economic and social outcomes have been linked to political upheaval, they have tended to not go far enough in their analysis. For example, high levels of youth unemployment have been linked to cultural and demographic features of Egyptian society, rather than being seen as a result of policies adopted by the Mubarak regime.

The paper takes a historical perspective and considers whether Egypt's economic policy framework contributed to social and political upheaval and what alternatives leading voices in Egypt are putting forward today. The paper is particularly concerned with investigating the impact of macroeconomic policies (fiscal and monetary) on social outcomes, as well as considering the nature of economic growth and structural change over the last 20 years.

The paper will outline the underlying social situation, with regard to employment, food security and poverty in Egypt, before turning to the nature and pattern of economic growth and structural change. The paper will then analyse more closely the macroeconomic policy trajectory in Egypt over the last 20 years. This final section of the paper will investigate the space and potential for the development of alternative policy frameworks in Egypt. It will consider what alternative policies might look like and where, if at all, demands for such alternatives are emerging from in Egypt.

The paper will rely mostly on secondary data from national sources in order to investigate policy trends and outcomes, complementing such research with interviews with key stakeholders and policy-makers in Egypt.

The above outlined analysis, linking economic policy frameworks with social and political outcomes is particularly important within the current climate in the Middle East and beyond. Without actors that can put forward a clear vision of alternative policy frameworks for sustainable, fair and employment-intensive growth in a country such as Egypt, it remains questionable if the current political revolutions will be sustainable and will result in real change for the people of the region.

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