

# Economic Inequality and Revolutions: Exploring Unattended Economic and Non- economic factors of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Mohamed El Hacen Sidi

**Abstract**—Revolution becomes inevitable when the reigning system fails to achieve the minimum level of social and economic development for the population of a nation. This is what happened in the case of Egypt when masses rose up and revolted against the regime of Mubarak in 2011. This research aims at finding out the economic and non-economic causes that prompted that revolution. For this, data were obtained through scrutinizing available formal literature as well as interviews using snowballing approach. It has been observed that the main causes behind the Egyptian revolt were the absence of social and economic justice and the lack of political freedom. Poverty, unemployment, food crises, income disparity and other factors are some of the economic causes that may lead people to mutiny and revolution. Technology and lack of democratic values are among some non-economic factors that motivate the people to revolt.

**Keywords:** Economic, income disparity, Revolution, Egypt.

## I. Introduction

The 2011 revolution in Egypt is one of the most noteworthy social and political events of the current century (Korotayev, Andrey, Zinkina, & Julia, 2011).

The success of that revolutionary struggle was striking as the protestors have overthrown the 30 years-old regime in just 18 days (from January 25 to February 11) (Wahba, 2011). It began as a street protest for social, political and economic change that ended with the toppling of the multi-decade old President Hosni Mubarak's regime (Wahba, 2011). The Egyptian revolution was part of the wave of revolt movements in Arab countries, commonly known as the 'Arab Spring', which have engulfed many Arab countries like Tunisia, Syria, etc. (Korotayev, Andrey, Zinkina, & Julia, 2011). These series of events have given birth to a magnitude of socio and political questions that needs rigorous intellectual analysis (Asaad, 2007).

Taking Egypt as an example, the researcher has studied the phenomenon with respect to economic and non-economic

factors that have led the masses to insurgency. In the analysis, the historic economic policies adopted by various regimes from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Mubarak have been studied. Moreover, the study of social factors such as family structure is also important to trace out the deep roots of rebellion.

## II. Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to understand the various economic and non-economic elements behind the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The objectives are to profoundly study the economic factors like poverty, unemployment and the social ones like property rights, social structure, and technology so that a more informative and enlightening amount of literature can be developed on the theory of revolts.

### A. Research Questions

To fully attain the research objectives, the answers to following set of questions will be sought in this paper:

1. What are the main motives of revolutionary movements stirred up in some Arab countries and often called the "Arab Spring"?
2. What was the role of class conflicts mostly of economic nature in the exacerbation of revolts?
3. How much do the social factors account for the Arab Spring?
4. What are the steps that can be taken to stop the occurrence of future revolts?

## III. Methodology

In this research, the major approach used is the qualitative approach where the data have been obtained through two methodological tools: through interviews and scrutinizing available literature. As there is huge literature available on revolts in general and the Arab Spring in particular, hence the researcher has restricted his work to selected fields; theories of revolution, factors of revolution in general and with respect to the case of Egypt and core economic and non-economic causes of revolution. After the establishment of theoretical foundation, the researcher has conducted a number of interviews. Snowball sampling approach has been adopted as the main sampling strategy. The reason for adopting this

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approach is that individual cases are tough to identify the individual members of population. A total of 32 interviews were conducted with Egyptian nationals across different places including 10 in Nouakchott (Mauritania), 10 in Yiwu, Zhejiang (China), 10 in Guangzhou Guangdong (China) and 2 in Xiamen, Fujian (China). More details about interviews and interviewees are provided in Annexure "A" attached at the end of this paper. A semi-structured approach was followed to keep the session in line with research objectives. The research questions were kept open-ended so that the respondents have ample room to provide their candid input. One main drawback of adopting this sampling approach is that there are significant chances of biasness. To handle this problem, we have focused on the consistency of answer under the light of knowledge developed through literature review.

#### **iv. The Notion of Revolution: A Theoretical Background**

Trotsky (1992) said; "The fundamental premise of a revolution is that the existing social structure has become incapable of solving the urgent problems of development of the nation".

This statement indicates that most of the times, revolt emerges at the moment when people feel that there is no way out to achieve their goals of social and economic justice. But before the final assault, people usually make several attempts to attain their goal (Webster, 1994). These attempts appeared in the form of street protest, strikes, demonstrations, insurrection in the law enforcement agencies, etc (Webster, 1994). During these demonstrations, the public indignation accumulates and often erupts in the form of a last strike that has the potential to overthrow the existing government (Webster, 1994). Another significant identification of uprising is that it is started by a middle class or lower class, against those ruling elites, who overturn the government and replace it with a setup that restores social and economic equality.

#### **v. The Revolt in Egypt**

Contrary to the predecessor movements of revolt in Egypt like the revolt of 1952 military coup, the current movement was deep-rooted and marked by the participation of the social forces at the grass root level. Main demands of protestors were related to their basic needs like bread, shelter, freedom and self-respect. (El-Shakry, 2011) said that the freedom movement of 2011 has to be seen in the context of earlier Egyptian uprising acts since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first movement was against the British in 1919 when people forced the invaders to flee from their country (El-Shakry, 2011). The second noteworthy revolt was that of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952 which came through a military coup and subsequently transformed the Turkish model society into a neoliberal's one (El-Shakry, 2011). (El-Shakry, 2011) argued that the main demands of the 2011 revolutionaries were economic and social justice just like the demands of the 1919 revolt. The current revolt, however, has certain characteristics that make it significant in the history of

world uprisings. For example, the diverse and massive participation of people belonging to the various sections of society is ample in evidence that the movement was immensely popular among the masses (El-Shakry, 2011). If this huge participation proves the legitimacy of revolt, it also highlights that the majority of people living in apparently diverse social classes has the same kind of needs. Hence they have joined their hands to fight for their freedom. Another imperative characteristic of this revolution is that it has happened without the involvement of a leader (El-Shakry, 2011). Throughout 18 days, the movement was organized and maintained through the participation of various social actors (El-Shakry, 2011). The Egyptian revolt was also different, as it was neither led by the hungry mob demanding food nor instigated by the religious fundamentalists (El-Shakry, 2011). Rather the main demands of protestors were democratic and secular, as they were asking for freedom, social justice and political rights.

El-Mahdi & Marfleet (2009) noted that though all the sections of society participated in the pro-revolution demonstrations, yet the role of youth in starting the movement was instrumental. They further emphasized that the youth especially students have their participation in almost all of the world revolutions. (El-Ghobashy, 2011) identified with the idea that most of the narratives of Egyptians revolt are focused on three most important points: technology, tribulation like increasing food prices and Tunisia (El-Ghobashy, 2011). She further elaborated two main theories that have been used to understand the revolutions; one is a dramaturgical model according to which the actors of a society gain new consciousness and rise up against the government. The second mode is the grievance model in which social issues start piling up which forces certain sections of society to live below dignity. With time, they understand the nature of exploitation and rebel against the ruling elite. (El-Ghobashy, 2011) pointed out that another cause of revolt is the inability of the state to enforce its laws that let people to come on roads and coerce the government to get their demands. This happened somehow in the context of Egypt where power has been shifted from the hands of government to the people. In the beginning the protest was local but two events served as a trigger that transformed it into a national movement. One was the murder of Khaled Said and the other was the heavy rigging in 2010 elections (El-Ghobashy, 2011). Both these events made the protest spread across wide geographical areas and made the demonstration become bloody when the government used force to crush the movement.

Khalidi (2011) argued that the main difference between current Arab revolutions and previous movements is that most of the current movements were against their own rulers instead of imperial or colonial powers. With time, people realized that the attitude of rulers who replaced their colonial predecessors is not different but that they are rather following the same foot prints and exploiting the masses (Khalidi, 2011). This constant discontent against the rulers is evidenced by an array of events like sectarian tensions, rape, drug abuse, soaring prices of food items and incivility (Khalidi, 2011). The citizens have been

treated as worthless creatures which have no political or economic rights (Khalidi, 2011). Moreover, the defeat of Arabs in 1967 war with Israel has already damaged the self-respect and dignity of Egyptians (Khalidi, 2011). In addition, the despicable attitude of Mubarak in many common causes of the Arab nation has severely hurt the self-image of the nation (Khalidi, 2011). Thus accumulated anger erupted against the regime that not only toppled the government but also gave a sense of unity and dignity to the people (Khalidi, 2011). In the context of Egypt, the restoration of people’s dignity, national honour, and sense of belonging to their own land are few successes that the Egyptian revolt has so far achieved. The remaining demands like food, jobs, political stability and economic recovery have yet to be achieved.

## VI. Discussions

### A. Economic Analysis of Egyptian Revolution

During the last 25 years, income disparity has increased in most of the known world, which ranked it as one of the most important agendas of discourse. Owing to sharp relevance, it is considered as a leading cause of most of uprising movements since the last century. These very widening gaps in income had led Karl Marx to predict the imminent economic revolutions. He explained that the concentration of wealth in the hands of few people usually of the upper class generates the class conflict that serves as fuel to revolutions.

In Egypt, political and social life has been closely linked to economic factors. Thus, living standards in this country have decreased as per the international standards since 1990. According to figures of United Nations, the population of Egypt living below poverty line is 20 to 30 percent. This uneven development and unjust income disparity has given birth to a small elite controlling a vast amount of wealth residing in suburbs of Cairo like Nasr city and Al-Zamalek. Just a few kilometres away, a huge majority of poor Egyptians are living in overcrowded houses with limited food, absence of clean water and not good quality health care.

From another yardstick, the situation is not very appealing as Egypt ranked at 92<sup>nd</sup> concerning the unequal income distribution country. The Gini coefficient - which is an authentic gauge of measuring economic inequality in a society - is around 34.4 in case of Egypt. Inequality in Egypt is also dictated by geographic area, as the north of Egypt is more affluent than rural southern areas because government is investing in northern areas. As the central government is more concentrated in the north of country, this part is receiving higher investments and turned into an economic hub. This concentrated development has resulted in the migration of people from south to north, which worsened the gap between rich and poor. This income disparity has roots in history as it is linked to the open door policy introduced by former president Sadat; economic equality cannot be resorted even after the announcement of land reform law of 1952 and other measures like rent control and Nasser's socialism. The figure shows that the upper 20% of population has around half of the

resources, in comparison to less than half in other developed countries. Likewise the upper ten percent controls more than 30% of national income.

Countries	Low est 20%	2nd 20%	3rd 20%	4th 20%	Highest 20%	Highest 10%
Egypt	5.8 %	10.7 %	14.7 %	20.8 %	48.0 %	33.2 %
France	5.5	11.5	17.1	23.7	42.2	26.4
England	7.0	11.5	17.0	24.8	39.7	23.4
Japan	8.7	13.2	17.5	23.1	37.5	22.4
Israel	6.0	12.0	17.7	24.4	39.9	22.6
USA	5.3	11.9	17.9	25.0	39.9	23.3

Figure 1: The World Bank, Source (World Development Report, 1989)

According to World Bank statistics, the GDP and GNI of Egypt have been increasing during the last decade, while GINI index has not significantly changed during the similar period, which suggests that the state of apathy of masses has continued unabated. According to the reports of UNICEF, the poverty rate among children was 47% and 44% in youth.

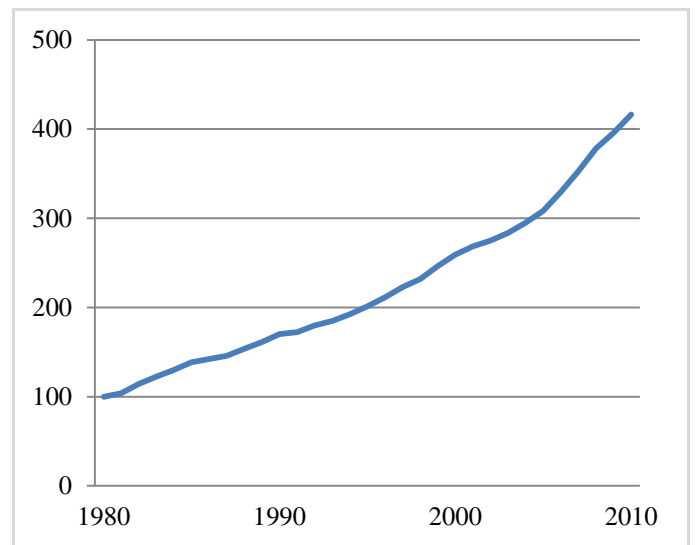


Figure 2: GDP Production Dynamics in Egypt (bins of 2005 dollars,) 1980-2010

The following figure shows that the unemployment in Egypt has been revolving around 8 to 12 %, which indicates that a significant number of people are unemployed.

The data gathered through interviews supported the idea of income inequality and poverty in most of Egypt. Most of the respondents said that they do not have proper jobs

Better lives Egypt, Social Indicators		
	1990	2009
Populations (m)	57.8	83.1
Labour Force (m)	14.3	25.4
Fertility Rate (m)	5.2*	02.9**
Infant Mortality	78.5*	34.8**
Literacy	57.0***	72.0****
Electricity Consumption	644	1,460
Fixed Telephone Lines & Mobile Phone Contracts per 100 pop	2.8	79.1
Passenger cars per 1,000 pop	18.7	33.3*****
*1985-1990 **2005-2010 ***1986 **** 2008 *****2006		
Source: Economics Intelligence Unit; ITU; UNESCO; UN Population Division; International Road Federation		

**Figure 3: Unemployment Level in Egypt, %, 1990-2010**

despite having basic education. They also complained about the role of corruption and nepotism that hampers the path of equal opportunity. One young respondent said; *“I am frustrated with the state of affairs as I feel that my voice is not being heard. I am unemployed for months and there is no job without bribe and contacts. Being depressed with poverty and unemployment, I joined the movement”*. These comments are more or less similar to other narratives the researcher has collected via interview. Almost all of them point to the factors of unemployment, poverty and unfair treatment by the state.

## VII. Non-Economic Factors

Certainly there are many non-economic factors that instigated people to rebel against the government. First is the role of information technology and widespread communication channels that allowed people to send their message instantly to their fellows. The fast growing pace of information and communication technology has casted significant impact on the rapid spread of revolt. The easy and rapid integration of people through social media networks allowed the revolutionaries to coordinate with mass number of people in less amount of time. (Ellis and Fender 2011) have proposed an information cascade model under which people tend to follow the behaviour of others. In addition, people master up their courage to revolt by watching signs of weakness in the state. The figure shows that there is high level of internet and social networking in the Egyptian society.

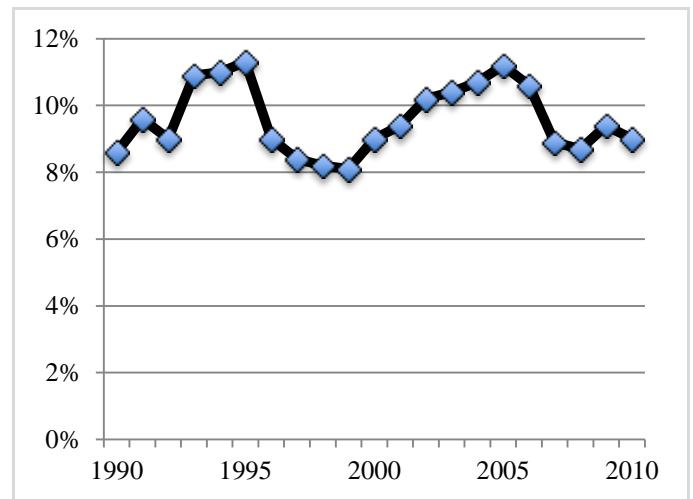
Education and job seeking have been an onus on Egyptians, with characteristics of many evils like little relevance of education to job requirements, high production of job seekers in comparison with jobs in the market and the saturation of public sector institutions. The private sector need people with education skills who have right kind of skills which are usually missing in the applications because of the mismatch between work requirement and education. The education level has also declined from 76 to 66 percent during 2007 and 2008. According to the report of Egypt Human Development Report (EDHR), 62% of unemployed people have intermediate degree, which is not considered apt for getting a good job.

Tab. 4. Internet and Social Network Penetration in selected Arab Countries, 2011		
Countries	Internet	Facebook
Algeria	13,5	5,4
Egypt	24,3	7,7
Libya	5,5	1,1
Morocco	41,3	9,8
Tunisia	34,1	22,5
Jordan	26,0	21,3
Syria	20,4	1,6
Bahrain	57,1	36,4
Yemen	10,0	1,4
World	30,2*	11,5*

Note: Data are calculated as a percentage of population. Source: ASRM (2011); \*Data internetwork June 2011.

**Figure 4: Penetration of Internet**

Egypt is characterized by a high population growth where there has been 82% increase in the total population during the last 20 years.



**Figure 5: Egypt's Social Indicators**

According to UNDP Human Development Report of 2010, 23% of the population is young belonging to the age group of 18-29. This high population growth coupled with limited employment opportunities force people to unite and vent their anger against the state, which utterly failed to satisfy their needs.

From the interviews, it also turned out that most of the respondents have access and expertise to use information and communication devices, which they use for entertainment and ideas sharing over the web. Plus, it is also noted that many of respondents have not enough skills to get a good job because they do not have the skills required by the employers. One respondent said; *“I supported the revolt because I think government does not care about me. We are bound to live like animals where there is no dignity and respect. We have to struggle a lot just to keep us alive.”*

This narration indicates that young people are finding themselves in difficulty to meet their day-to-day needs and the system failed to provide even the basic necessities of life.

Further; it shows that these people are already angry with insolent behaviour of the state which just needs a small push to wage war against the unjust force of state.

## VIII. Conclusion

It is concluded that the most fundamental reason behind the Egyptian revolution is the class disparity that is the result of lack of social and economic justice. Though the Egyptian GDP has been growing through the last decade, yet the benefits of progress could not reach to the majority of masses. Uncontrolled corruption has deteriorated law and order; rampant poverty, decades-long dictatorship, rising unemployment and the fast growing population all led the people to rebel against the government. Among the non-economic factors, one can cite technology, marginalization of a class of population especially youth and poor categories as well as the absence of representation, etc.

These factors have instigated the people to overthrow the regime of Mubarak. But for the Egyptian people, there is a long way to go to actually get a stable and just government.

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## Annexure "A"

Interview Name	Nationality	Gender	Age	Occupation	Interview Place	Interview Time	Interview Date
Ahemmad Syed	Egyptian	Male	46	Teacher, Nouakchott University	Nouakchott, Mauritania	11:00-12:30	17.02.2014
Omar Salem	Egyptian	Male	47	Teacher, Nouakchott University	Nouakchott, Mauritania	14:45-15:40	20.02.2014
Mohammad Ali	Egyptian	Male	50	Teacher, Shanguity university	Nouakchott, Mauritania	18:10-19:50	25.02.2014
Ammar Zubair	Egyptian	Male	39	Businessman	Nouakchott, Mauritania	10:00-11:00	02.03.2014

Mostava Akib	Egyptian	Male	42	Businessman	Nouakchott, Mauritania	09:30-10:40	03.03.2014
Zeinab Badawy	Egyptian	Female	43	Business woman	Nouakchott, Mauritania	14:30-15:30	04.03.2014
Nasir Ahmmad	Egyptian	Male	38	Businessman	Nouakchott, Mauritania	10:20-11:45	07.03.2014
Yousife El Mansoury	Egyptian	Male	24	PhD Student Nouakchott University	Nouakchott, Mauritania	10:15-12:05	08.03.2014
Nabil Azahrawi	Egyptian	Male	26	Master Student Nouakchott University	Nouakchott, Mauritania	14:30-15:25	08.03.2014
Nadda Bader	Egyptian	Female	24	Master Student Nouakchott University	Nouakchott, Mauritania	10:15-11:45	09.03.2014
Ahmade Musaa	Egyptian	Male	31	PhD Student GuangZhou University	Guangzhou, China	11:45-12:45	16.04.2014
Aboubaker Basouny	Egyptian	Male	33	PhD Student GuangZhou University	Guangzhou, China	18:05-19:15	16.04.2014
Mohammade Boukhary	Egyptian	Male	32	PhD Student Sun Yat-sen University	Guangzhou, China	12:00:13:30	17.04.2014
Ali Omar	Egyptian	Male	33	PhD Student Sun Yat-sen University	Guangzhou, China	18:15:19:45	17.04.2014
Mansour Hamza	Egyptian	Male	34	PhD Student Sun Yat-sen University	Guangzhou, China	11:15-12:30	18.04.2014
Mohammad Mussa Hammad	Egyptian	Male	45	Businessman	Guangzhou, China	19:10-20:25	18.04.2014
Yasir EL Mourady	Egyptian	Male	48	Businessman	Guangzhou, China	19:30-20:45	19.04.2014
Ahmmad Ali	Egyptian	Male	51	Businessman	Guangzhou, China	20:15-21:45	20.04.2014
Mohammad Ali Ahmmad	Egyptian	Male	45	Businessman	Guangzhou, China	19:40-21:15	21.04.2014
Maher Mostafa	Egyptian	Male	46	Businessman	Guangzhou, China	20:05-21:40	22.04.2014
Mohammeed Idress	Egyptian	Male	41	Teacher, Cairo University	Yiwu, China	14:30-15:30	17.07.2014
Mostafa Mohammad	Egyptian	Male	30	PhD Student JinHua University	Yiwu, China	18:30-20:15	18.07.2014
Mohammad Mousa	Egyptian	Male	31	PhD Student JinHua University	Yiwu, China	18.40:20:20	19.07.2014
Hamza El Mansoury	Egyptian	Male	33	PhD Student HangZhou University	Yiwu, China	20:30-21:45	21.07.2014
Mohamed Abdella	Egyptian	Male	32	PhD Student HangZhou University	Yiwu, China	22:30-23:30	21.07.2014
Mahmoud Abdalla	Egyptian	Male	40	Businessman	Yiwu, China	19:15-20:30	22.07.2014
Yagoup Mohammad	Egyptian	Male	43	Businessman	Yiwu, China	19:20-20:45	23.04.2014
Ahmmad Mohammad	Egyptian	Male	44	Businessman	Yiwu, China	19:30-20:50	24.04.2014
Mohammad Moussa	Egyptian	Male	43	Businessman	Yiwu, China	19:25-20:40	25.04.2014
Ali El Mahroury	Egyptian	Male	51	Businessman	Yiwu, China	19:30:20:45	26.04.2014
Mohammad Shokry	Egyptian	Male	34	PhD Student Xiamen University	Xiamen, China	19:30-21:15	08.09.2014
Yassir El Basouni	Egyptian	Male	38	Businessman	Xiamen, China	20:15-21:50	15.09.2014

About the Author:



*Considering the case of Arab Spring Revolution, poverty, dictatorship, unemployment, food crises, income disparity etc. were few of the causes that led the people for mutiny. Indeed, technology and lack of democratic values were also among non-economic values, which motivated Egyptian people for revolution.*