

## **The 2020 Egyptian Protests**

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A call for social change. A rally to protect fundamental human rights. A fight for a new political regime. The recent Egyptian protests sparked its flame on September 20, 2020. With a purpose to demand President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's resignation, the protest attracted the national spotlight. Over thousands of participants ranging in over ten cities demonstrated anti-Sisi rallies and united under one goal: challenging the current Egyptian government.

### **Background**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi first came into power in 2013, following the removal of President Mohamed Morsi. The then-army chief General el-Sisi led a coup d'état that resulted in the arrest of Morsi and other Muslim Brotherhood leaders. Subsequently, el-Sisi continued his role as the defense minister and leader of the armed forces; it was not until June 2014 that he was elected into office, with 96% of the vote. He was re-elected later in April 2018, with around 97% of the vote. Currently, President el-Sisi leads an authoritative regime where, since former President Morsi's removal in 2013, he has banned any unauthorized demonstrations. Hence, protests have become increasingly rare in Egypt as they are intensely criminalized.

In 2019, Mohammed Ali—a former Egyptian building and military contractor who had worked with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's administration—indicated that the nation's government was heavily corrupt. Ali explained that the President was

squandering public funds by using finances on sumptuous construction projects. He evidenced several videos on social media to outline his point. Following Ali's expose, many more joined in on the criticism towards the government, triggering a nationwide debate. With the sparked political and social tensions and on September 20, 2019, anti-Sisi protests rolled out in the streets of Egypt. Many called out for President el-Sisi's resignation. More than 4,000 protestors were arrested. Thus, this first wave of protests did not achieve its goal of dismissing President el-Sisi from office and died down. But the fuel of the 2019 protests did not disappear.

### **The Protests**

This year, on August 29, using Arabic hashtags translated to #WeDon'tWantYou and #GoOutOn20September, Mohammed Ali once again called for protests against the President and called for the end of el-Sisi's regime. He also took to Facebook, recording a video message saying "This is our chance to liberate our country." The first day of the protests—September 20, 2020—was the anniversary of last year's protests. Continued grave concerns such as the unstable economy and cases of human rights violations, as well as new issues such as the mishandled coronavirus situation all came together to fuel the resurgence of protests in Egypt.

Another recent factor contributing to the growing protests is the threat of house demolitions. The government revealed a housing campaign (Reconciliation Law on Building Violations) last year that gave residents two choices: either pay a large fine to keep their house or have it destroyed. According to Reuters, the settlement fee is between 50 and 2,000 pounds per square meter. These high prices pose a significant threat to many who cannot afford to pay it. Citizens have until the end of October to make this crucial decision. This campaign was justified by government claims that homes were built on agricultural or governmental land without permission and are hence illegal. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has stated that more than a third of all buildings break the law and that 700,000 violations have already been recorded. The magnitude of this law and its impact added a surge of protestors from poor, rural communities to the backlash. If the administration continues with the demolitions,

hundreds of thousands will be left homeless as their houses are replaced by sleeping tents during a pandemic.

### **The Response**

The government has responded with force against protestors. Videos on social media show harrowing accounts of tear gas, batons, and live bullets being deployed to counter the demonstrations. Police forces shot 25-year-old Samy Basheer in Giza and 26-year-old Owais al-Rawy in Luxor while they were demonstrating. Police arrested more than 2000 people due to the protests. Among them, 110 were minors and children, with the youngest being 11-year-old Yahya Qader. According to The Arab Foundation for Civil Society Support, protestors are being charged for trumped-up charges, including the following: working with terrorist groups, broadcasting and disseminating fake news and statements, and funding and inciting people to protest. Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director Philip Luther comments that "The fact that these protestors took to the streets while knowing the very high risk to their lives and safety they were taking shows how desperate they were to demand their economic and social rights."

Since 2013, the government has had a strict no-tolerance-to-opposition policy. As mentioned earlier, President el-Sisi's administration outlawed protests. However, they have not yet commented on the arresting of protestors or this year's wave of protests in the country. Government-supported media outlets have taken it upon themselves to express their opposition towards the protests and continue signaling support for the government. Certain platforms have even broadcasted that the protests are a hoax and more have claimed that the protests are only taking place in small numbers.

The international response has generally been strong. The UN stated that Egyptians should be "allowed to express themselves, and for governments to listen to the people." Concerned with human rights violations and the arrest of thousands of protestors, 222 members of the European Parliament issued a letter to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi expressing their concern for the detentions of political prisoners in Egypt.

Congresspeople in the US also sent a similar letter calling for the release of detainees. The US even threatened to pose sanctions if the Egyptian government fails to act upon the United State's request.

As tensions within the country continue to heighten with the pandemic and the eviction laws, the Egyptians' protest hold much at stake. What will become of the thousands risking their lives to protect their rights? Only time will tell.

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