A Tale of Two Egypts: contrasting state-reported macro-trends with micro-voices of the poor

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A Tale of Two Egypts: contrasting state-reported macro-trends with micro-voices of the poor

SOLAVA IBRAHIM

ABSTRACT Poverty, inequality, unemployment, torture and corruption were among the main reasons why millions of Egyptians protested to end 30 years of Mubarak’s rule in January 2011. The speed with which the regime has fallen and its fragility surprised the world. This is mainly because of the false image of a stable, prosperous and progressive Egypt propagated by the state, ignoring another Egypt, a poor, suffering and repressed one. The failure to see the latter Egypt led to the fall of the former. The aim of this article is to tell a ‘tale of two Egypts’ by contrasting the experiences and voices of poor Egyptians with the misleading figures reported by the state. The analysis shows how the state was able to provide Egyptians with growth without equity, education without inspiration, employment without security, health services without care and voting without any real impact on political processes.

On 25 January 2011 the Egyptian youth surprised the world by marching in millions to call for an end to 30 years of authoritarian rule by President Mubarak. What was even more surprising was the speed with which the regime fell, which showed its fragility—despite having been viewed for decades as one of the most stable in the region. However, was the demise of the Egyptian regime really so unexpected? Those who have been following the news of sit-ins and protests in Egypt over the past few years would say: ‘definitely not’. The demise of the Egyptian regime started long before it actually fell.

The aim of this article is to tell ‘a tale of two Egypts’. The article draws a picture of life as experienced by ordinary Egyptians in contrast to the misleading picture of the prosperous, growing, progressing Egypt that has been propagated by the regime and by the West for decades. By describing people’s grievances, expressing their needs and pointing out their unfulfilled aspirations, the article sheds light on a ‘second Egypt’: a deprived, repressed and suffering one. By telling the tale of two Egypts, the article seeks not only to explain—from a grassroots perspective—‘what went wrong’, but also to
argue that the failure of the Egyptian regime was not really so unexpected, as many claimed, but was rather felt for so long by ordinary Egyptians.

**Why two Egypts?**

After the uprising each of the 82 million Egyptians started to come up with ‘an Egypt’ of his/her own. Nevertheless, this article focuses only on two Egypts, while acknowledging that this conceptualisation is not wedded to two and that others might choose to frame it differently. The focus on these two Egypts—the prosperous and the poor—is for the following reasons. First, although it is undeniable that the middle classes were the main driving force of the revolts, organised the demonstrations and co-ordinated them through Facebook, the poor did not simply remain in their homes. At the beginning the poor were afraid and reluctant to take risks; however, after the success of the first days of demonstrations, they joined the middle classes in their quest for freedom, dignity and social justice. They, too, suffered from soaring food prices and thus supported the young educated middle classes in their uprising. It is the combination of economic and political demands that led to the explosive situation necessary for the revolution. Once the middle classes broke the silence, the ‘dormant’ masses were successfully mobilised and marched in millions, calling for the fall of the corrupt regime.

Second, for the first time, the demands of the middle classes coincided with those of the masses. Both had similar concerns and suffered from state repression, bad services, high inflation and unemployment, albeit to different degrees. While the middle classes were the ones who started the demonstrations, their slogans were not only related to their own problems, but had nation-wide resonance: ‘bread, freedom and social justice’. Economic and political demands were combined for the first time. These demands were initially fourfold: 1) reducing poverty, setting a minimum wage and reducing unemployment; 2) ending the state of emergency and respecting freedoms; 3) changing the minister of interior (who was known for using torture and arbitrary arrests); and 4) limiting the number of presidential terms. Although these demands later escalated, they nevertheless remained of common interest to both the middle and lower classes, thus maintaining the mass mobilisation for the demonstrations. Finally, although the middle and lower classes participated, the revolts remained mainly urban phenomena. The mass mobilisation took place in major cities, such as Cairo, Alexandria and Suez, while participation from the ‘rural poor’ remained minimal. Nonetheless, one cannot deny the popular nature of the uprising, nor the growing number of protestors who in the end succeeded in forcing Mubarak to resign.

After the fall of the regime Arab and Western media expressed surprise in their early commentary on what had happened in Egypt. However, we should not have been surprised. For decades the West has been pointing out the need for democratisation and political reforms in the Middle East and many Western governments were aware of the growing public discontent in the region, especially in Egypt. Yet they somehow chose not to recognise—at least publically—the fragility of the regime or its failure to provide for its
people. Tadros explains that ‘by focusing on the formal institutional actors, we failed to “see like citizens” and missed out on the experiences citizens faced on a day-to-day basis’. The ‘politics of presentation’ thus played a major role in perpetuating such a deceptive image of Mubarak’s regime as to justify the continued Western support for him. The ‘real’ Egypt, however, can be revealed through the lives of ordinary people, who felt the state failure in all spheres of their lives. This failure was reflected in the state’s ability 1) to promote growth with no benefits for the poor; 2) to provide education with no inspiration for future generations; 3) to generate employment with no security; 4) to provide health services with no care; and 5) to allow voting with no impact on political outcomes, thus leading to the inevitable and unsurprising collapse of the regime.

Manifestations of a failing regime

The demise of the regime has been manifested in all domains of Egyptian life. The growing state dependency on repressive security forces demonstrated the state’s inability to accommodate the increasing demands for political and economic reforms. The mushrooming of slum areas, especially around Cairo, was not only a clear manifestation of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, but was also a ticking time-bomb that everybody knew was going to explode one day. Although the data on the scale of *ashwa’iyyat* (slums) in Egypt is highly varied and under-estimated, depending on the definition of ‘informal areas’, the population living in these areas ranges from 5.7 million to 21 million. In Greater Cairo alone the number of people living in informal settlements accounts for almost 65.6 per cent (about 10.7 million). The rockslide in Manshiet Nasser in September 2008 killing 119 people demonstrated the deteriorating living conditions in these informal settlements. The Cairo deputy governor and seven others were held accountable for this disaster and were sentenced to five and three years in jail when found guilty of negligence. Nevertheless, this has been one of the few, exceptional occasions when the government punished its officials for non-performance, in this case, mainly to calm the enraged public after the tragic death of slum dwellers.

In the past decade the absence of accountability mechanisms and the increasing levels of corruption simply led to the absence of justice in Egyptian society. The perception among many poor people was that ‘the powerful’ (especially if backed up by political alliances) could simply get away with any crime. This was manifested in the case of ‘loan deputies’ when 31 businessmen and bankers fled the country to dodge the repayment of bank loans. Corruption was also evident in the sinking of the poorly maintained *Al-Salam Boccaccio* 98 in 2006—one of the deadliest maritime disasters—which caused the death of 1312 passengers and 96 crew members; the ship’s fugitive owner was sentenced to only seven years in prison. According to Sullivan and Jones, the ‘prosecution of public officials and ruling party actors for corruption and other abuses of power is selective, depending on the Mubarak regime’s need to eliminate and punish internal opponents’. It is therefore not surprising that Egypt’s rank, according to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI)—
deteriorated from 105 out of 180 countries in 2007 to 127 out of 178 countries in 2010, mainly because ‘corruption is endemic in Egypt’. The ‘catholic marriage’ between the regime and businessmen, reflected in the growing corrupt partnerships between them, not only delegitimised the state and led to biased economic policies and unfair taxation systems, but also distorted political life when many such businessmen became ministers, parliamentarians and dominant figures in the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP monopolised political life in Egypt by rigging elections, by continuing to plan for ‘hereditary succession’, despite the growing public disagreement with it, and by systematically weakening opposition parties and restricting their formation. As a result, the poor were left with no alternatives except to ally with the Muslim Brotherhood, as a result of the latter’s infiltration of the grassroots and their use of popular religious discourse. The increased tensions between Muslims and Copts and the growing mistrust between the state and the public also led to a segmented citizenship and increased social exclusion.

The failure of the state and the decline of its bureaucratic powers was also experienced by the poor at all levels of governance and in almost all domains of their lives: in their limited access to adequate sanitation (about 85 per cent of communities in rural areas in 2005 were not connected to a sewage disposal network), in the deteriorating educational and health care services as well as in their failure to find adequate jobs, housing or income sources. The absent, inadequate or poorly targeted social security system also left poor families with no minimum standard of living; this was clear in the repeated attempts of many young men to illegally migrate to European countries in search of better futures. Many felt that the state was no longer able to ‘get anything done’. The dominant rent-seeking behaviour among government officials (at all levels) and their indifference towards serving the public showed not only the limited state capacity, but also the absence of state will to respond to public demands.

How did all this go so unnoticed? Because there were in fact two Egypts: one viewed by the state as stable, prosperous and progressive and another one experienced by the public: a poor, suffering and repressed Egypt. The failure to see the latter Egypt led to the fall of the former. The demise of the Egyptian state was a result of the state’s failure to listen to people’s grievances and to respond to their demands promptly and effectively. The Egyptian state—despite its efforts to appear stable and legitimate—was unresponsive, incapable and unaccountable, especially to the needs of the poor. The next section demonstrates how the Egyptian state failed to reduce poverty at a sustainable rate over the past three decades.

Why focus on the ‘poor Egypt’?

Egypt’s efforts to reduce poverty have been rather slow and unsustainable. Today more than 18 million Egyptians are still living in poverty; 6.1 per cent are ultra-poor. Since 2005 the severity of poverty has worsened, leading to ‘a sharp increase of incidence of extreme poverty in rural areas’. Upper Egypt
remains the poorest region, with an average poverty rate of 32.1 per cent. Despite government investments, the rates and severity of poverty in this region have worsened over time, as ‘rural Upper Egypt has persistently suffered from higher poverty rates of about twice the national average’.16

Tracking poverty trends in the past two decades, one notices that poverty increased between 1981–82 and 1995–96 from 17 per cent to 22.9 per cent; however, it then decreased to 17 per cent in 1999–2000.17 In the past few years poverty in Egypt has in fact risen yet again from 17 per cent (10.7 million) in 2002 to reach 20.16 per cent (14.1 million) in 2005 and 21.6 per cent (18 million) in 2008–09.18 Using all measurements the severity of poverty has increased from 2.9 per cent to 3.8 per cent. In this period ‘average per capita expenditure declined across all deciles nationally and in all regions’.19 Despite designing a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Egypt,20 30 years after Mubarak took power 42.8 per cent of Egyptians are still living on $2 a day or less, compared with 39.4 per cent in 1990.21

These poverty trends indicate the unsustainable nature of poverty reduction strategies under Mubarak’s regime, which can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, Egypt has failed to provide sufficient job opportunities, especially for its frustrated youth. Among young people aged 15 to 24 years unemployment rates were as high as 24.5 per cent in 2007.22 Second, illiteracy remains as high as 30 per cent and combined school enrolment ratios decreased from 90.9 per cent in 2004 to 77.6 per cent in 2007–08.23 Third, although the real annual GDP growth rates averaged over six per cent during 2005–08, this growth has been biased against the poor. Recent studies reveal the regime’s failure to promote growth with equity since ‘the rich gained more than the poor, especially in rural areas, which show even a fall in real welfare for poorest percentiles in contrast to overall positive growth rates’.24 This article therefore focuses on the experiences of these marginalised poor Egyptians, adopting a capability framework and applying a grounded methodology to articulate their voices.

Adopting and applying a ‘capability’ framework in Egypt

This research adopts the capability approach, as developed by Amartya Sen, as its conceptual framework. It views development as ‘a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’ and thus defines poverty as capability deprivation rather than lack of income.25 According to Sen, ‘poverty is not a matter of low well-being, but the inability to pursue well-being precisely because of the lack of economic means’.26 The capability approach refuses to reduce well-being to the mere command over commodities, but rather focuses on people’s achievements, their beings and doings, and their capability to function. By acknowledging the multiplicity of values and the heterogeneity of factors involved in the valuation exercise of human well-being, the capability approach broadens the informational space needed for an adequate exploration of such a complex concept. Accounting for interpersonal variations, human diversity and multicultural differences, the approach does not impose a specific definition of poverty or well-being,
but rather assesses quality of life mainly in terms of human freedoms, which enable each person to pursue the capabilities that s/he values and has reason to value. Building on this conceptualisation, this research articulates the voices of the poor to examine whether the Egyptian state succeeded in promoting the capabilities of the poor or not. It explores the ability of the state, not only to increase the incomes of the poor, but also to build their basic human capabilities—such as health and education—and to expand their political and economic freedoms through adequate employment and political participation.

To articulate these voices, the research does not pre-identify the poor per se, but rather targets geographic areas where the poor in Egypt live. It draws on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008 in two sites in Egypt: 1) Manshiet Nasser (one of the largest slum areas in Cairo); and 2) rural villages in Menia (one of the poorest governorates in Upper Egypt). The choice of fieldwork areas was based on the fact that Manshiet Nasser and rural Upper Egypt are two of the poorest areas in Egypt. It was therefore assumed that most of the respondents in these areas would fall into the ‘poor’ category. The results of the questionnaire have in fact proved that this assumption was correct. It is important to note, however, that our aim here is not to select a representative sample, but rather to present the voices of the poor in these two selected sites in Egypt to allow for a careful examination of their perceptions and experiences under Mubarak’s regime. The sample size and selection does not allow us to make wider generalisations about Egypt’s overall performance.

The voices of the poor in these two sites were articulated through a well-being questionnaire, with 92 open-ended questions to leave space for the poor to express their own voices and avoid any distortion of their narratives. The respondents were chosen through stratified random sampling and snowballing. The researcher used two stratification criteria—age and gender—to allow for intergenerational and inter-gender comparisons. A total of 150 questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore people’s perceptions of well-being and examine different patterns of self-help initiatives they undertook to ‘fill in’ the gap left by the incompetent state. Although the well-being questionnaire explored various domains of people’s well-being (general, economic, social and mental), this article focuses only on five such dimensions: income, education, employment, health and political freedom.

The following sections reveal how the gradual demise of the Egyptian state was reflected in each of these domains. It shows that: 1) the rapid economic growth was inequitable and hence failed to benefit the poor; 2) the educational services provided had ‘hidden costs’ and failed to prepare young people for the job market; 3) the job opportunities generated were insufficient and insecure; 4) access to health services was limited and their quality was low; and 5) people’s voting patterns were mainly influenced by clientelism and ethnic and religious affiliations rather than party politics. ‘The Tale of two Egypts’ unfolds when the major gap between the macro-level trends (as reported by the state) and the articulated micro-level voices (as expressed in this research) are revealed in each of the following domains.
Growth with no equity

Based on the most recent Household Income, Expenditure and Consumption Panel Survey, ‘the welfare of an average person who was poor in 2005 increased by almost 10 percent per year between 2005 and 2008; this was sufficient to move this household out of poverty’. The real GDP growth rates have increased from 3.2 per cent in 2002–03 to 7.5 per cent in 2007–08. If these are the reported macro-trends in growth in Egypt, did this growth enhance the ability of the poor to generate sufficient income for their households? It seems not. Two-thirds of the respondents (67.5 per cent) in our sample argued that they failed to earn sufficient income for themselves and for their families. Men and women equally failed to achieve this capability (66.7 per cent and 68.3 per cent, respectively). In Manshiet Nasser, the respondents had a higher deprivation of this capability (75 per cent) compared with those in Menia (60 per cent).

The fact that the poor in the two selected sites failed to earn enough income shows that the reported promising growth rates failed to increase the income of a significant section of the population, especially the poor. Based on the results from our sample, a number of structural impediments and institutional factors prevented the poor from benefiting from this growth. First, the rising living expenses and the economic recession rendered it difficult for many poor families to survive. Many of the poor had two jobs; however, with the rise in prices of many goods, such as bread and meat, in addition to high rents and utility bills (especially for water and electricity), the poor found it very difficult to ‘make ends meet’. Recent studies indicate that the ‘prices of food and other basic goods and services increased much faster than other prices. The cost of the subsistence minimum food basket increased by 47 per cent, far more than the overall increase in the CPI (31 per cent over the three years)’. Indeed, food prices reached critical levels in late 2010 and have certainly contributed to the political uprising in January 2011. The rapid economic growth thus not only failed to reach the poor, but even led to a fall in their real wages.

Second, not only was the cost of living rising, but also the availability of job opportunities was limited. The low quality of educational services and the spread of corruption and nepotism hindered the poor from accessing well paid jobs as they lacked the necessary skills and training to match the job market requirements. They also encountered several difficulties in opening their own businesses because of their lack of asset ownership and their limited access to credit. As a result, young people were usually ‘forced to accept any jobs they can get in the informal economy’. Even those who were employed in government suffered from low salaries (ranging from £250 to £400 per month). This explains why guaranteeing a minimum wage has been one of the main demands of the protesting youth.

Under Mubarak’s regime vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, those with big families and those with health problems, suffered the most. Many of them in our sample complained about the low levels of social security benefits or the lack thereof. Although the Egyptian government spends almost four per cent of government budget on safety net programmes, it is clear
that vulnerable groups among the poor failed to benefit from such programmes. This is mainly because the money was too little in relation to daily expenses, in addition to the complex application processes and inefficient programme administration, which not only wasted resources, but also failed to meet the financial needs of such vulnerable groups.\textsuperscript{37}

Finally, the rising costs of education, especially that of expensive private lessons, was another reason why the ‘Egyptian growth’ failed to translate into better living conditions for the poor. School fees are not a key concern for poor families, but rather the cost of private tutoring. Underpaid teachers threaten to fail pupils if they do not pay for private lessons.\textsuperscript{38} Many poor families end up paying almost half their families’ income on these lessons. Such ‘hidden’ costs are another reason for the growing gap between the ‘two Egyptians’. On the one hand, the state assumes that it provides free education, while, in reality, poor families have to dedicate more than half their incomes to educating their children.

While the state was ‘proud’ of its rapid economic growth, this analysis shows that the benefits of this growth were not equitably distributed. The voices presented in this section demonstrate that the distribution of benefits from economic growth was perceived in some vulnerable regions in Egypt, such as Manshiet Nasser and Menia, to have fallen seriously short. The failure of the state to realise this, led it to continue to believe that growth would inevitably and automatically trickle down and that its benefits would be equally reaped by poor and rich alike. This was clearly not the case mainly because the poor were entangled in various poverty traps or ‘vicious circles’. Figure 1 presents two of them. The low incomes of the poor rendered them unable to access better education, thus forcing them to accept low paid jobs which in turn limited their income-earning capacity. The poor were also forced to accept working under hazardous conditions, thus jeopardising their health. These health problems were often a double-whammy as they caused

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Two vicious circles of poverty in Egypt.}
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further deterioration of living conditions, especially when high health expenditures led to loss of jobs, incomes and assets.

**Education with no inspiration**

If growth failed to benefit the poor, did education help them? Following Egypt’s illiteracy and school enrolment ‘macro-trends’ (as presented in Table 1), one can note that there has been relative progress in literacy rates, which have been steadily increasing between 1990 and 2007 (with a slight decline in 2004). Basic and secondary education enrolment ratios have been relatively stagnant until 2000, when they began to rise until 2004 before starting to fall again. Although these macro-trends somehow present a ‘positive’ picture of progress in education, Egypt still ranks 101 out of 169 countries on the international Human Development Index (HDI) scale. The main question therefore is: does the improvement in literacy and school enrolment rates in fact reflect a real and substantial improvement in people’s ability to be educated?

Although macro-data generally highlight positive educational trends in Egypt, micro-voices—as articulated in our sample—present yet a different picture. When asked whether they had succeeded in achieving their aspired educational levels or not, sadly 80 per cent of the respondents reported that they did not achieve their educational goals. About 82.7 per cent of those who actually valued education, failed to achieve it. This striking finding reveals that, contrary to the reported macro-trends, poor people in our sample suffered from a major failure to achieve their educational aspirations. Their educational attainments were clearly not enough for them to achieve their goals in life. This finding is crucial, as the macro-trends indicate progress in ‘education’; however, when the voices are considered, this finding is actually refuted.

Surprisingly, despite their higher ‘macro’ literacy rates, men seemed to feel even more hindered in achieving their aspired educational goals than women: 84.6 per cent of men felt they had not had ‘enough’ education, while 75.6 per cent of women reported the same. This may be mainly the result of the women’s low educational aspirations; such women might have adapted these aspirations to their social and cultural setting. People in Menia in Upper Egypt also suffered from greater lack of education (82.5 per cent) than

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1. Illiteracy and school enrolment rates in Egypt—the macro-perspective</th>
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<td>Literacy rate percentage (15+)</td>
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<td>Basic and secondary education enrolment ratio</td>
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those in Manshiet Nasser (77.5 per cent). These ‘voices’ confirm the macro-
trends which indicate that, in 2010, the literacy rates (15+) in urban regions
were much higher (79.1 per cent) than in rural areas (only 62 per cent).\textsuperscript{40}

While the state was propagating its success in gradually eradicating
illiteracy and increasing school enrolment, the poor in Menia and Manshiet
Nasser were suffering from a major failure to achieve their aspired
educational goals for financial, social, structural and personal reasons.
Rising educational costs did not allow many respondents to continue their
studies, thus forcing them either to drop out of school or even preventing
them from going to school in the first place. Although Egypt’s spending on
education as a share of GDP is five per cent (comparable to many European
countries), the quality of its education system has been deteriorating.\textsuperscript{41} This
is not in general the result of lack of resources, but rather of inefficient
spending and overstaffing. For example, the teaching: non-teaching staff ratio
and teacher: administrator ratio have both worsened in recent years. ‘In
primary and preparatory education, there is now, stunningly, about one
administrator for every teacher’ and some governorates even have more
administrators than teachers.\textsuperscript{42} These figures explain the discrepancy between
the state’s reported increases in educational spending and the growing
frustration among the poor with the low quality of educational services.

In addition to these economic and structural constraints, many respon-
dents also complained that they had to study subjects they did not like, either
because of their grades or because of the high costs of private lessons, which
they could not afford. Others made market-driven choices of subjects that
would help them find a job, but which did not fulfil their educational goals.
Egypt’s Public Expenditure Review confirmed these findings as it revealed
how the poor labour market outcomes for youth and the high stakes testing
at the end of secondary schooling distort the incentive environment for
education in Egypt. The report also points out that more than a quarter of
private spending on education is for private tutoring, indicating that ‘private
tutoring is very high and surely inequitable in its impact, with the poor
unable to pay as much’.\textsuperscript{43} It is therefore obvious that, although the state
might have been providing free education and increasing its spending on it,
these resources have clearly failed to reach the poor because of structural
inefficiencies.

Social factors also play a role in educational attainment. Some female
respondents argued that they failed to achieve their desired educational
capabilities because of gender discrimination when their parents preferred to
educate their brothers. Some respondents also reported that, when parents
were illiterate, they failed to see the benefits of education as parental
education usually has positive influence on the returns to children’s
education.\textsuperscript{44} The nature of the educational system is a further reason why
the poor failed to achieve their educational goals. Mistreatment by teachers,
rising educational costs and low returns from education caused many
respondents to question the quality of the educational services. It is therefore
clear that the Egyptian state was able to provide ‘education but with no
inspiration’ for many young men and women who increasingly felt a growing
disappointment with their educational achievements, which were nowhere near their aspired goals. It is this frustration that drove them onto the streets on 25 January 2011.

**Employment with no security**

If growth failed to reach the poor and if educational services failed to inspire them, did the Egyptian state succeed in securing employment for its growing young labour force? Employment can be key in helping the poor not only to generate sufficient income but also to educate their children. According to the ‘Egypt MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] Midpoint Assessment’ report, employment grew by at least 2.71 per cent between 2002–03 and 2007–08 as a result of the rapid GDP growth and increased investment. The macro-figures also show a decline in the unemployment rate from 9.5 per cent in 2005–06 to less than nine per cent in 2007–08. Was this decline reflected in the ability of the poor to find adequate jobs? Our analysis shows that most of the respondents in the two selected sites (61 per cent) succeeded in finding employment. This confirms the fact that ‘poor young people cannot afford to stay unemployed. Thus, the incidence of unemployment may be low, although youth are still in poverty’. In Egypt those with the lowest levels of education have the lowest unemployment. However, this relatively higher employment rate among poor young people does not necessarily reflect their satisfaction with their jobs. Almost half of younger respondents in our sample pointed out their dissatisfaction with their current employment.

This dissatisfaction was mainly caused by the nature of their jobs, the inadequate working conditions, the lack of job security, low salaries, long working hours and the difficulty in fulfilling family responsibilities while working, as well as the mismatch between education and job market requirements. As the poor cannot afford to remain unemployed, they are usually forced to accept any job. These ‘obligatory’ jobs do not satisfy the poor’s ambitions and thus enhances their feelings of frustration. The nature of the jobs also rendered many employed youth dissatisfied. Unfriendly working environments, long working hours, heavy workloads, tough working conditions were some of the reasons for their dissatisfaction. A major reason for this job dissatisfaction was the absence of job security. Most of the respondents who were on temporary contracts explained that they never managed to obtain permanent positions and their salaries were lower than those of other employees. This is not surprising, since ‘only 15.7 percent of employed youth in Egypt have a contract’. This lack of job security also limited their ability to plan their lives and even sometimes led to discrimination in the workplace. One of them explained that ‘those with permanent contracts sit and the others with temporary contracts have to work’. This dissatisfaction and lack of job security has also been backed up by evidence presented by Assaad and Barsoum, which reveals the deteriorating labour market conditions for first job seekers who can largely only find employment in informal regular private wage employment as a result of the rapid decline in public sector and formal private sector jobs.
Manual workers also suffered from lack of job security, as they simply depend on their daily wages and do not have access to any health or social insurance. The concerns of these respondents have been echoed in a recent report by the Ministry of Investment indicating that ‘the private sector denies around a quarter of its workers social and health insurance benefits’, thus raising concerns about the conditions of work in both the informal sector and the private sector. As a result of this lack of job security in the informal sector many respondents preferred a permanent government job, despite its low salary, as it gave them their desired job security and allowed them access to pension and other forms of social security benefits. Institutional factors, such as social security, medical insurance and a contract thus have a major impact on the quality of jobs in Egypt. Even when some respondents were eager to start up their own small business projects they encountered a number of difficulties, such as the need to prepare a feasibility study, the limited availability of assets or any other collateral for loans, the difficulty in finding a place to set up their projects and the complexity of government procedures to obtain licences for these projects. This in turn exacerbated their feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Many respondents were also dissatisfied because they were unable to use their education to get adequate jobs. University graduates and diploma holders in our sample explained the difficulties they encountered finding employment because of job scarcity and their limited job experience. This frustration is not surprising, since 43 per cent of the unemployed youth in 2010 had university degrees. One of the clear manifestations of the regime’s failure was therefore the growing number of unemployed youth, which accounted for almost 2.5 million on the eve of the uprising. Half of those unemployed belonged to the 20–24 age cohort. This was exactly the same group (the young educated youth) that was the main driving power of the revolts. Unemployment is clearly a youth problem since ‘at least 90 percent of the unemployed in Egypt are youth’. Harrigan and El-Said have therefore warned that, unless the Egyptian government succeeds in bringing down youth unemployment, this could be a major cause of social unrest. This turned out to be the case.

In addition, many respondents argued that their education did not help them gain the necessary skills required for the job market. This finding has been confirmed by a recent Survey of Young People in Egypt stating that, among higher education students, ‘less than 60 percent believe their education prepares them for the labour market’. This is why they have to get training, especially in computing and language skills. Others ended up working as taxi drivers or construction workers and hence failed to apply what they had studied in a ‘relevant’ job. The quality and utility of public education is also questionable, since ‘most Egyptians attending university are mainly in liberal arts colleges with less than 20 percent in scientific faculties (engineering, medicine, science and health studies). The majority study Arts, Economics and Commerce’. As a result of such a biased educational system, ‘unemployment rates continue to be high for secondary and university graduates, especially for the poor…where 29 percent of poor
educated persons of age 18–29 were unemployed’. The mismatch between education and job market requirements thus translated the higher levels of educational attainment into higher levels of unemployment among the educated. It is therefore not surprising that between 2006 and 2009, the employment situation of young people (15–29 year olds) deteriorated significantly (from 57 per cent to 53.7 per cent for males and from 14.1 per cent to 9.1 per cent for females), leading to increased levels of frustration.

These high unemployment rates among the ‘educated’ youth are a clear manifestation of the two vicious circles in which the poor are trapped, as illustrated in Figure 1. It is clearly not enough for a poor person to break the vicious circle of education and poverty, as s/he will still probably be unable to compete in the job market because of the low quality of education and the labour market mismatch, in addition to the lack of connections in obtaining job opportunities or even getting information about available jobs. This in turn reduces the equality of opportunity for the poor and leads to their deepened frustration.

**Health services with no care**

Health is another crucial domain of the poor’s well-being that was highly neglected by the Egyptian state. According to recent government figures, Egypt is on track to reduce infant mortality and maternal mortality. Between 1990 and 2006 infant and under-five mortality rates declined by 49.5 per cent and 56.1 per cent, while maternal mortality rates decreased by 51.7 per cent between 1992 and 2000. In addition Egypt is also in the process of reforming its health insurance system. However, the question is again whether these reforms and improvements have been reflected in the access of the poor to adequate health care services or not.

When asked about their access to health services, more than half of the respondents (56.3 per cent) in Menia and Manshiet Nasser explained that they had limited or no access to adequate health services when they encountered a health problem. The limited access became even more evident when considering only those with health problems, among whom only 26.9 per cent actually had access to adequate health services. This means that almost 65.4 per cent of respondents with health problems did not have access to adequate health services. This finding could be attributed to the bias in public expenditures on health in favour of higher income groups and urban academic hospitals, which leads to greater inequality in access to health care resources by poorer households.

When asked about the quality of the health care services they receive, no respondent reported that they were very good, 46.3 per cent considered them good and almost half of the respondents claimed that the health services were either bad (33.8 per cent) or very bad (20 per cent). The latter complained about access, the cost and the nature of the health system. The number of health care centres, especially in remote satellite villages, was very limited. Respondents in rural villages complained that they had to walk long
distances to get access to primary health care. The working hours of available health care centres were also not suitable, as they rarely operate at night. These centres were usually not prepared to deal with emergencies as they were only equipped to deal with primary care and did not have basic medical equipment, such as x-ray machines or machines for blood analysis.

Even when access to health care was guaranteed, the quality of the health service received remained low, as one respondent summed up: ‘the doctors do not care about the sick person. One needs to have connections to be able to be treated quickly.’ Careless doctors and nurses, crowded clinics and wrong diagnoses are not uncommon. In many cases ‘the doctors are not always present, and the nurses are not trained to deal with the patients’. The respondents in our two selected sites explained that most of the available services were specialised in reproductive health services and family planning programmes, thus failing to serve the wider population. Finally, in addition to the access and quality of health care services, their cost was also a problem. Although these services were meant to be free in public hospitals and centres, some respondents had to pay for the service; otherwise they were denied it. It is therefore evident that ‘although government policy makes health care free for the poor, free health services are in fact not available’.63 As a result of the low quality of public health services, some respondents resort to private clinics. However, they complained about the rising costs of such private services as these can lead not only to increased financial burdens on poor households, but also to asset loss as a result of the parasitic practices of some private clinics.

Voting with no political impact

The previous sections contrasted macro-trends in growth, education, health and unemployment rates with the micro-voices on income-generation, job security and the quality of educational and health care services. This section deals with another crucial domain, that of political participation and voting, to illustrate the discrepancy between the reported macro-trends and the micro-level experiences of voters. Voting is by no means an adequate indicator of the level of political participation in Egypt. Nevertheless, given the limitations on this research, this domain was used as an example of people’s exercise of their political rights.

When asked whether they ever voted in an election, almost two-thirds of the respondents in our sample (58.8 per cent) answered positively. More men (66.7 per cent) voted than women (51.2 per cent). Interestingly, more people voted in rural villages in Menia (70 per cent) than in Manshiet Nasser (47.5 per cent). This may be because many respondents in rural areas voted on the basis of ethnic and family affiliations. Those who said that they did not vote mentioned that they did not have voting cards, were not on the voting lists or simply mistrusted the political candidates and were not interested in politics. During election times the irregularities of electoral rules also discouraged many respondents from voting. In addition, many respondents did not vote simply because they mistrusted the candidates. Some of them commented that: ‘no one deserves my vote as no one serves his constituency’.
These voices pointed out the inefficiency of the electoral system and the lack of accountability channels between the constituents and their representatives, especially in poor areas. This finding is not surprising, given the low levels of competition and turnout in elections. The subdued political participation in Egypt is thus a manifestation of political dissent and social clientelism, which the Egyptian state has clearly failed to see.64

Those who actually voted could be divided into two groups: those who wanted to choose the right representative to serve their communities and considered their political participation as a duty; and those who were simply bribed or forced to vote. For the first group, voting was one of the few means left by which they hoped to induce change. They simply wanted to ‘choose the right person who serves the district’ and considered voting as their duty and their right. The voters among the respondents also condemned the passiveness of other community members; they commented that ‘they should not complain if they did not participate in elections’. Political participation was therefore seen as a means for the poor to have a voice.

In contrast to these politically oriented voters, a second group of voters explained that they participated simply because they were bribed or even ‘forced’ to vote. This was evident through those voices which explained that: ‘people go to elections to get a bag with a blanket and a kilo of meat! But I did not even manage to get one!’; ‘I voted in the last elections as the candidate used to give us money. The current candidate promised, but did not give us anything.’ Some respondents explained that they were somehow ‘coerced’ by members of their families or communities to make specific choices. These findings confirm various studies on voting patterns in Egypt. While some Egyptians might vote for ideological reasons, the majority of voters, however, expect to receive direct or indirect material benefit from this participation. This is clearly the case for the poor and illiterate as they are ‘cheaper’ to bribe and more vulnerable to intimidation by state authorities.65

Instead of reinforcing accountability, enhancing legitimacy or inducing political change, elections in Egypt were thus simply ‘moments of clientelistic transactions between candidates and voters’.66 They were considered by voters as a pressure valve to gain material benefits and to improve the quality of social services in their area. It is therefore not surprising that the political system was unresponsive to these voters since they were not contesting the government’s power, but rather vying for its spending to address their economic needs and extract government concessions during election times.67 While elections in the past also served as a ‘valve releasing social discontent’,68 the parliamentary elections in 2010 clearly alienated the public and opposition alike, thus leaving no choice for them except to topple the regime.

Ethnicity and religious affiliations played a crucial role in elections. People did not vote on the basis of party affiliation, but rather on location, family and village affiliation. They voted for their relatives and for candidates from their villages. None of the respondents mentioned anything about ideologies or political affiliations, thus showing how the electoral system in Egypt was dominated by clientelism and rent seeking as well as ethnic and religious
affiliations rather than party politics. Understanding this nature of the electoral system is crucial not only for analysing the results of the constitutional referendum in March 2011, but also for exploring the dynamics of parliamentary and presidential elections in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Why now? The conjuncture of economic and political demands

The previous analysis showed how the gap between the ‘two Egypts’ continued to grow in all five domains: income, education, health, employment and political participation. Although this gap grew in the past decade, the main question is: why now? Why did this gap evoke such widespread public dissent and lead to a major public uprising in January 2011, while previously ‘at no point did any of the...prodemocracy demonstrations gather more than 2500 demonstrators’? It was the conjuncture of economic and political demands that led to the wide public mobilisation. For the first time ‘bread and butter issues’ were combined with calls for political reforms. In addition to the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions—discussed earlier—a number of political factors fuelled the recent uprising in Egypt, two of which are worth noting here: growing political repression and the ‘succession project’.

One of the main reasons for the revolution has been the growing political repression and the denial of basic freedoms, such as freedom of association and freedom of expression, by Mubarak’s regime. This regime has been one which ‘routinely violates its citizens’ civil and political rights, including freedoms of assembly and association, as well as the right to participate in the political process as a candidate or elector’. These violations were also apparent in the systematic and indiscriminate repression of ordinary Egyptians by the police, as for example in the case of Khalid Said, whose commemorating group organised the 25 January protests. This repression not only eroded the existing social contract (based on trading political rights for social welfare), but also united the public against the failing regime. It was therefore not a coincidence that the protests started on 25 January, the national holiday known as Police Day. The state of emergency, which had been in effect since Mubarak assumed power in 1981, was used by the police to justify arbitrary arrests and human rights violations against citizens. This increased dependence on political repression not only delegitimised the regime, but also made it opt for elite support and ‘back-room deals’ to compensate for its lack of broad public support. With increased literacy, the existence of new channels of communication and the ineffectiveness of state repression and censorship, the regime’s ability to respond to popular demands was severely hampered. As early as August 2009 it was clear that ‘while Egypt on the surface appears stable, the potential for growing political volatility and abrupt discontinuities in the short term (six to 18 months) should not be summarily dismissed’. Ironically, exactly 18 months afterwards, the January 2011 revolution took place, fulfilling the prediction of political instability and regime fall in Egypt.
In addition to the ‘police state’ and the loss of legitimacy, Mubarak’s continued failure to rule out his son, Gamal, as his successor was another tipping point for the collapse of his regime. Following his ascent to power in 2000, Gamal Mubarak was groomed to succeed his father in a number of ways. He was presented as the ‘champion of youth’ and as a ‘reformer and moderniser’ and he established the Future Generation Foundation to address the problems of the disaffected unemployed youth. In addition to managing his father’s presidential campaign in 2005 and tailoring the Constitutional Amendment 76, Gamal headed the Policy Committee in the ruling NDP party. This was meant to infuse the party with ‘new thinking’ and marginalise the ‘old guards’ of the regime in order to consolidate Gamal’s influence. In reality, however, this committee ‘consisted of corrupt, state-nurtured capitalists with monopoly control over profitable sectors of the economy’. In the process of grooming Gamal to take power, ‘no constituency of society seen as being vital in the politics of succession has been missed...the businessmen, the technocrats and the Egyptian people have all been addressed directly or indirectly by Gamal’. Washington was also comfortable with Gamal as successor to avoid any fundamental changes in US–Egyptian relations. Despite these efforts, the growing public refusal of the ‘succession project’ led to the rise of the Egyptian Movement for Change under the slogan Kifaya (Enough), rejecting Gamal’s prospects of inheriting power. These prospects were also threatened when others, such as Omar Suleiman, the former head of Egyptian General Intelligence, and Mohamed El Baradei, the former International Atomic Energy Agency chief, were considered competitors and possible challengers to the ‘hereditary succession’. It is important to note, however, that it was again the combination of economic and political factors that fuelled the public outrage. Public opposition to the politics of succession was not only based on the aforementioned political factors, but also on the growing public frustration with the neoliberal policies of Gamal’s economic team. These were a major cause of the high levels of inflation and the rising costs of living, which were widening the gap between the ‘two Egypts’. It is therefore clear that ‘repression and exploitation were the two matches setting fire to popular action; repression affecting the more affluent ranks of the middle class, and exploitation the lower ones’. Egypt thus represents a classic case of an authoritarian regime which not only failed to solve the economic and social problems of its society, but also suffered from a crisis of political succession, increasing opposition and a complete erosion of legitimacy. Through its failure on both the political and economic fronts, Mubarak’s regime has managed to alienate the Egyptian public, which has led to the uprising.

What now? The role of the military

Examining the role of the military is also crucial, not only for assessing future political developments in Egypt, but also for understanding why its role has been different from that in other countries, such as Yemen, Syria and Libya.
Although all the military officers were recruited under Mubarak’s regime and benefited from his largesse, unlike in other countries the Egyptian army stood by the protesters and refused to use violence to subdue the revolution. There are five main reasons for this. First, despite the growing leverage of the military and its relative economic autonomy under Mubarak’s regime, the privileged position of its officers was highly exaggerated compared with their counterparts in the police or in the ruling party. Second, despite Gamal’s efforts to win the support and consent of the military, it was clearly opposing the ‘succession project’, as every president since the 1952 revolution has come from the military establishment. As the backbone of the Egyptian state, the military was thus the decisive actor in the approval or rejection of the succession project. Third, in the past decade the dominance of businessmen over political life in Egypt had caused ‘agitation’, as the military feared that such dominance would ‘push the military out of politics and back into the barracks’. Fourth, the Egyptian army is a conscripted not a fully professional army. One can therefore argue that such an army would most probably (but not always) refuse to use force against its own people, since conscription creates a link between the army and society and allows them to share similar values. Finally, unlike other Arab states, the Egyptian army failed to support Mubarak because of its historic allegiance to the Egyptian people and its reluctance to forego this trust—even to support its own commander-in-chief. The army sided with the Egyptian people not only because it sympathised with their demands, but also because it did not want to jeopardise its reputation by trying to save a clearly failing regime. The military, as an institution, thus remained much stronger than the regime and the business community, and hence successfully resisted its push to marginalisation. It remains to be seen, however, how successful it will be at filling the political vacuum in Egypt and setting the country on its road to democracy.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the demise of the Egyptian state started long before the regime had fallen. By contrasting macro-level data with micro-level voices, the analysis demonstrated that there were in fact two Egyptians. The first Egypt—as represented by government figures—was characterised by rapid economic growth, improved literacy rates, reduced unemployment, expanded health care services and protected political rights. The second Egypt—as revealed by the voices of the poor—was marked by a rising income gap, an irrelevant and uninspiring educational system, frustrated unemployed educated youth, inefficient health care services and a corrupt political system. Was the state completely unaware of these problems?

The problem was not limited state awareness of these issues, as the state was certainly aware of many of the people’s demands. In fact, most government plans included programmes to particularly address these demands. Indeed, ‘the issue in Egypt is not so much the lack of policies
and programs to help the poor as the lack of information about whether or not existing efforts are indeed helping the poor. The crisis arose, because of the growing gap between what the state was providing and what the people were getting and were aspiring to. The absence of adequate accountability and participatory channels, especially at the local level, widened the gap between the state and the public. While the state undermined people’s suffering, it continued to be misled by promising macro-data drawing a ‘rosy’ picture of Egypt’s future.

This analysis has revealed how such macro-level trends were not reflected in poor people’s lives. Rapid economic growth was not felt by the poor because of the decline in real wages and the rising costs of living, especially food prices. The state was spending on social security benefits which failed to help the poor as they were too little and badly targeted. The state claimed it was providing free education, while poor families were paying half of their incomes on private tutoring and other hidden educational costs. It tried to encourage entrepreneurship and help young people open up their own businesses, overlooking the difficulties they encountered because of their limited access to credit and the complicated licensing procedures for such projects. Despite improvements in school enrolment and literacy rates, in reality the educational attainments of the poor failed to help them achieve their goals in life. The state was spending five per cent of GDP on education; however, these resources were not translated into better educational attainments because of overstaffing, inefficient spending and limited accountability. While the state successfully lowered unemployment rates, it overlooked the poor quality of jobs, which were usually insecure, temporary and informal. Unemployment also remained highest among the most educated, hence their frustration and their leadership of the protests. The state also successfully improved reproductive health programmes but ignored the deteriorating quality of other medical services. It also neglected the bad treatment and humiliation that the poor suffered from in public hospitals. Finally, while allowing for limited political participation through manipulated and rigged elections, the state has clearly failed to realise the growing political aspirations of Egyptians, which have clearly surpassed such ‘nominal’ participation.

The gap between these two ‘Egypts’ continued to grow, which is why Egyptians marched in millions to express their frustration and to call for freedom, dignity and better living conditions. They had realised that the Egyptian state could no longer deliver. Although Egypt’s Human Development Report 2005 called for a new ‘social contract’ to reconstruct state–society relations, recent events proved the failure of the Egyptian state not only to renegotiate such a new social contract, but even to see the need for it. The integration of political and economic demands finally united the opposition front and led to mass mobilisation against the regime. The frustrated youth felt that they had a life but with no future. They simply had no option except to take to the streets to put an end to a corrupt regime, one that denied them the ability to live in dignity and freedom. They rose on 25 January 2011, in search for a future—hopefully a better one.
Notes

22. EHDR, *Youth in Egypt*, p. 148.
28. Research has been conducted also in Tafahna Al Ashraf, a rural village in the Delta region; however, because limited space, the findings of this research will not be presented in this article.
30. Ninety percent of the respondents were poor, i.e. they were living on under 1$ or 2$ a day. These respondents earned less than EE$151 per month, i.e. they fell under the official $1 at PPP a day poverty line in Egypt. I understand the limitations of this measurement method; however, the main aim of the study is not to measure the level of poverty, but rather to articulate the perceptions of the poor. During the fieldwork it was confirmed that, in these communities, people living on roughly EE$600 per month or less were considered poor. Only those earning more than EE$1000 per month were considered ‘well-off’. Thus, in addition to the ‘objective’ poverty line, a communal understanding and subjective measures of poverty were also used.
32. MSED, *Egypt*.
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36 EHDR, Youth in Egypt, p 148.


38 Ibid, p 36.


43 Ibid, p 16.

44 Nugent & Saleh, ‘Intergenerational transmission of and returns to human capital’, p 1.

45 MSED, Egypt, p 9.

46 EHDR, Youth in Egypt, p 82.


50 MSED, Egypt, p 9.


55 Population Council, A Survey of Young People in Egypt, p 86.

56 Ibid, p 86.

57 EHDR, Youth in Egypt, p 82.

58 Said et al, ‘Unemployment, job quality and labour market stratification’.

59 Population Council, A Survey of Young People in Egypt, p 90.

60 EHDR, Youth in Egypt, p 82.


63 Sabry, ‘The Social Aid and Assistance Programme of the government of Egypt’, p 34.


66 Brownlee, ‘Executive elections in the Arab world’, p 810.


68 Singerman, Avenues of Participation.


70 Sullivan & Jones, Countries at the Crossroads, p 1.


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