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The Economic Causes of the Egyptian Revolution
“January 25, 2011”

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Introduction

A growing number of recent studies on the Egyptian revolution attribute its beginning to a set of socio-economic and political factors. On the political side, explanations includes a) the persistent rule by terror for thirty years through the emergency law, b) the prohibition on political rights and civil freedoms and lack of free and fair elections, c) police brutality against activists– namely the case of Khaled Said) the wide spread corruption, e) the spread of virtual-opposition through social networking websites and the Arabic satellite, f) the success of the Tunisian revolution as a bloodless and fast change, the sacrifice of Mohammed Bouazizi, and finally the spread of wikileaks scandals that threw more mud over the regime’s face. . On the socio-economic side, the revolution is largely attributed to the rise of unemployment, inflation of food prices, low income and rising inequality, the lack of health services. In short, the revolution is explained by the increasing density and pervasiveness of social, economic and political grievances that culminated into an uncontrollable anger towards a diminishing legitimacy of Mubarak’s thirty-years-rule of the country. This was largely reflected in the main demands of the protestors to end Hosni Mubarak’s rule, end emergency law, freedom, social justice and human dignity.

This paper suggests a growing significance of the economic motives of social and political change through highlighting the economic dimensions of Egypt before 25th January 2011. It reviews different indicators of the economic conditions in Egypt before the revolution, in a way to answer a main question, “what are the economic motives behind the 25th January revolution in Egypt?” The structural approach followed on this paper slightly touches on the Marxian conception of dependency– by which social, political and cultural structures are perceived as dependent on the economic super-structure. In this paper, these dimensions are seen as rather intertwined and mutually dependent on each other; the economic motives are only one face of a complex web of explanations that generate meaning and resonance to similar experiences elsewhere. Meanwhile, the structural approach is deemed suitable to a leaderless revolution, since it provides a set of ‘totalising’ factors that facilitate collective action on massive scales by creating a national narrative of the revolution.

This paper is organized around eight sections that circumscribe the economic situation in Egypt; economic stagnation, income inequality and poverty levels, the demographic aspect–population size, unemployment, rise of food prices compared to income levels, education’s irrelevance to job opportunities in the market and the wealth and gender gaps.

Revolutions in Theory and Practice

Joseph D. Reid, a professor of economics with specialisation in economic history and developmental economics underlined how specific economic interests contribute in motivating the masses towards revolutions. “In fact, diverse economic factors brought about the American revolution above which was taxation. The disputes over trade, government control, and taxes eventually brought about the American revolution and shaped the way America is today” (Reid, 1978).

In an economic interpretation of the French Revolution, Florin Aftalion emphasized that economic theory can provide a satisfactory explanation to the occurrence of the French revolution. Directly before the French Revolution, France was in a major economic crisis. There was a royal debt; the French government kept spending more money than it was receiving by taxes. “At this time there was immense poverty in France, even though some people in France were wealthy. Taxes were high and so were prices, but the wages were low. Unable to provide for their families the lower classes of France lived an economical crisis which drove them to revolt. Economic factors included hunger and malnutrition in the most destitute segments of the population, harsh economic situations they faced, especially bread shortages” (Aftalion, 1989).

James Davies also noted that revolutions are most likely to occur “when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal”, (Davies, 1962).

Additionally, a number of surveys recently conducted on the Arab region suggest a higher weight for socio-economic causes of a nation-wide revolution in the Arab countries, compared to narrow-based protests that usually erupt on political and sectarian concerns. A survey by Jamal and Tessler (2008) reports a sweeping support for democracy in the Arab world sizes up to 86% - 91% of the total respondents to their survey in five Arab countries. The survey concluded that democracy for the Arab middle class men and women is an instrumental concept, relating directly to social and economic concerns, poverty, unemployment, housing, etc., rather than political freedom and civil rights (Ibid, 109).

Meanwhile, growing eyewitness evidence supports the point that the revolution effectively started on the 28th January when the poor youth, mostly living in slums and urban backyards, had urged their social groups to support what was, then, activist-led protests raising demands for political freedoms. The police brutality against middle and high-class activists, who vastly organized themselves through social media, draw the sympathy and support of thousands of slum inhabitants who once decided to voice their, mainly, economic grievances.

The Economic Causes of the Egyptian Revolution

Poverty Levels and Inequality of Income Distribution

As income disparity increased in the past 25 years in most parts of the world, this issue is taking place at the top of the public agenda nowadays. In most countries of the world, inequality is considered as a lead cause for revolutions and unrest.

When Karl Marx predicted that an economic revolution would occur, one of his main concerns was related to the unequal distribution of wealth. According to Marx, wealth and power would naturally tend to concentrate in the hands of the few in the upper class who in turn exploited the lower class. This eventually leads to certain problems, foremost among them poverty and income equality.

Between the 1980s and mid-2000s, income inequality rose significantly in countries as diverse as China, India, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. According to the OECD, during the same time frame, the Gini coefficient increased in 16 out of 20 rich countries. The situation was no different in the emerging market economies; it rose in India, China, Indonesia, South Africa, and all the post-Communist countries. In much of the world, the size of the economic pie has been shrinking, and accordingly the poor's slice has been getting smaller.

Another common method of analyzing economic distribution is to use the family as the basic income unit and then rank all families from lowest to highest. After the incomes are ranked, they are then divided into fifths, and then examined. This data is then plotted on the Lorenz curve- a curve that shows how much the actual distribution of income varies from an equal distribution- by adding the percentage the lowest fifth earned to that of the next highest fifth, and then plotted as the first point of the graph. This number is then added to the middle fifth and plotted as the second point. This process continues until the cumulative values of all fifths are plotted. If all families earned the same income then the graph for the Lorenz curve would be a diagonal line beginning in the lower left-hand corner and moving towards the upper right hand corner. But because all families do not receive the same income, the curve showing the actual income distribution is curved.

Living standards in Egypt are low by international standards, and have declined consistently since 1990. According to United Nations figures, 20 to 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Uneven development and unfair income distribution has led to the emergence of an affluent class that controls most of the country's wealth. Living in such Cairo suburbs as Garden City, Al-Zamalek and Nasr City, the wealthy enjoy an elevated standard of living. Yet not far from these affluent neighborhoods, a significant number of poor Egyptians live in

squalor, with poor and overcrowded housing, limited food supply, and inadequate access to clean water, good quality health care, or education.

On the Gini coefficient scale, Egypt is ranked as the 92nd most unequal country with a Gini Coefficient of around 34.4 and this contributed dramatically to widespread protests and government overhaul.

Inequality in the distribution of wealth is further dictated by geographical regions in Egypt. The north of Egypt has always received more government attention than the rural south. The central government, which retains great power over the country, has always been based in the north, and has therefore based major economic activity in that area. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Country Profile for 2000-01, almost one-half of economic and social establishments of Egypt are based in the north in Cairo and Alexandria. This uneven distribution resulted in rural-urban migration from south to north. Such migration contributed in worsening the state of underdevelopment prevailing in the south.

The economic reforms launched by the Egyptian government in the early 1990s have been double-edged, severely affecting the lower classes. Both the rural and urban poor have suffered from the long decline in the quality of social services provided.

Income distribution has been unequal in Egypt since Sadat's open-door policy. Even before Sadat's open-door policy, in spite of Egypt's 1952 Land Reform Law (later amended to put an upper limit of no more than 50 feddans on land ownership), and in spite of Nasser's socialism, taxation, and rent controls, still income distribution was unequal. The following table provides cross-country comparisons of income distribution which might serve a purpose to compare figures for income distribution in Egypt prior to its open-door policy in 1974 with those in other nations.

Country	Lowest 20%	Second 20%	Third 20%	Fourth 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

Source: The World Bank, *World Development Report, 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press,

In analyzing the data, it can be observed that the households in the upper 20 percent of income brackets had almost half of Egypt's national income, while in other capitalistic nations their share was approximately 40 percent. The richest 10 percent of Egypt's households had one third of the country's income, in comparison to less than one quarter in the case of England, France, and even the United States.

A report recently published by the Egyptian government itself admits that in the last few years poverty and inequality have grown in the country. That is the reason why, in spite of the ban on protests, there have been for some years constant workers' strikes and demonstrations on the streets and factories, demanding decent wages and greater distribution of wealth. Therefore, it can be observed that Egypt's imbalanced income distribution has reached a level that created social tensions and led to serious crisis manifested in the January 25th revolution.

According to official World Bank statistics, Egyptian GDP and GNI have been following an increasing pace throughout the last decade.

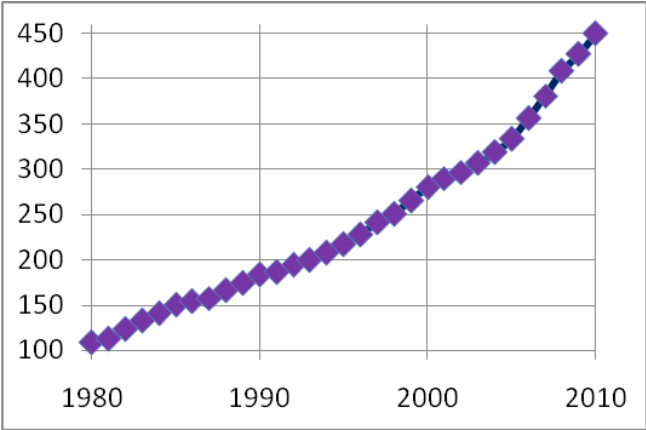


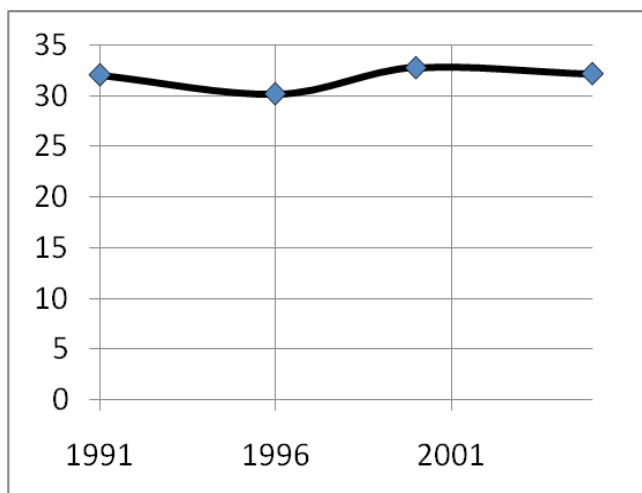
Figure (1) GDP production dynamics in Egypt (blns of 2005 dollars, PPP), 1980–2010¹

As for the GINI index for inequality, the statistics indicate an almost unchanging state of the measure since the 1990s.

¹ The data is derived for the World Bank statistics on:

Chart derived from (korotayev and Zikina, 2011)

Figure (2) Economic Inequality (Gini index) in Egypt, 1990–2005²



2001	3860
2002	3900
2003	4030
2004	4230
2005	4480
2006	4890
2007	5310
2008	5710
2009	6020
2010	6160

The share of the highest 20% of the national income amounted to 41% in 2005, while the share of the lowest 20% of the population was only 9.0% along the period from 1990-2005. Poverty headcount ratio at the national poverty line in percentage sized up to 22% in 2008 compared to 19.4% in 1996.

While these indicators suggest a relatively stable and forwarding economic development in the country, a number of critiques are addressed at the credibility of information sources on which the World Bank data is based (reference). Meanwhile, a parallel measure of human development indexes suggests a different view on the poverty of youth– its causes and consequences. The Human Development Report of Egypt in 2010 examined the case of young poor in rural and

² Ibid.

urban Egypt, highlighting the role of social stratification in discriminating against the poor youth. Among the results it reports is a shocking percentage, 44%, of youth in rural upper Egypt defined as poor compared to 22.7%, 19.3%, 8.8%, in upper urban, lower rural and lower urban regions respectively (2010, 76).

There are important areas at which poor youth are especially excluded: overcrowded living arrangements and ownership of various assets—cellular phones and computers. The deprivation indicators among youth in Egypt suggest a higher propensity to experience poverty at lower age groups and the ‘younger young’ compared to ‘older young’ (ibid): “Poverty rates peak dramatically for teenagers between 15 to 17 years, rising to almost 29% and almost 27% for young adults between 18 and 20 years.” (77). The pervasiveness of poverty in different youth segments is also striking.

According to the UNICEF report on child poverty in Egypt (2010), around half of the children (47%) in poor household experience at least one severe aspect of deprivation among six other dimensions (health, education, shelter, nutrition, water, sanitation and information) as compared to 14% of non-poor children (ibid, 78). In such a way, it is not surprising that most of the active figures since 25th January protests are among the youth. The significance and impact of youth activist is further highlighted through Bayat’s approach to social-non-movement, which focuses on the spatial characteristics of poverty and social inequality in urban Cairo, and how a ‘politics of practice’ by youth poor/disadvantaged living at the backyards of urban Cairo, has accumulated social and economic grievances that suddenly erupted in the 28th of January. The next paragraph gives a closer look into Bayat’s amazingly relevant insights on the silent, fluid, flexible and self-producing strategy of dissent adopted by the urban poor” (p.16).

According to Bayat, the poor slums around urban districts in Cairo represent the hard bulk of masses in lower urban Egypt, in which the poor silently encroach into the public spaces of urban Egypt. Examples of such ‘encroachment’ include the use of public spaces for private gains (paid parking, street sidewalks are used by vendors who expand their business from benefiting from popular trademarks like Adidas. In such ways, ‘the ‘right to city’ of rural youth migrants transforms the social configuration, invade the urban modern way of life and impose different social and cultural presence.

The passive networking among such masses, termed as ‘non-movement’ turn into active networking when faced with a common threat or opportunities (2009, 13-6). By this insight, we understand how the slum dwellers, the migrant rural poor in urban Egypt, became suddenly an compelling, irresistible, wide-spread and hardly controllable force of change, when inspired by a partial breakthrough, opportunity, in the regime after the protests of urban middle and high-class activists in the 25th January.

In conclusion, while the economic indicators show a relatively stable and even improving status of economic development in Egypt, the spatial and demographic factors, along with other equally effective political and social aspects has sized up into a massive nation-wide revolution that voiced out primarily socio-economic grievances of the population: bread, freedom, and social justice and human dignity.

Overpopulation and Youth Unemployment

In the search for underlying causes of the Egyptian revolution is the demographics; an explosive mix of high population growth leading to a "youth bulge"³, where one in five Egyptians is between ages 15 and 24, and one - half of the population is below age 25 (figure 3). Combined with urbanisation, jobless growth partly linked to structural adjustment, and the rapid expansion of university education has produced what is called "a new sociological type: the graduate with no future" (Peterson Institute for International Economics.⁴

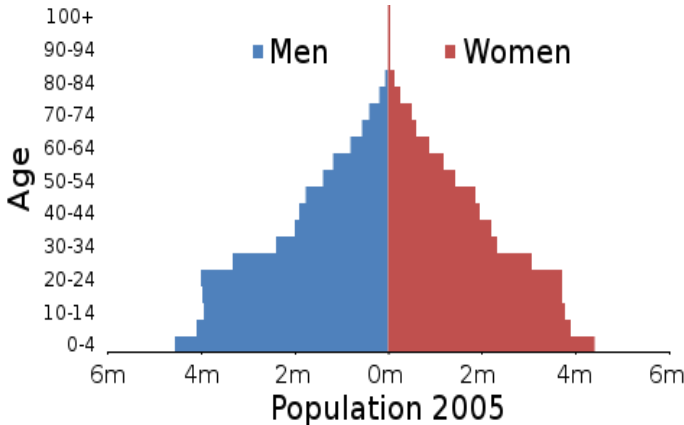


Figure (3) Youth Bulge in Egypt, Population Council Youth Survey 2009

The Ex- President Husni Mubarak ruled Egypt for nearly thirty years, during which the population grew by 90%, from 45 million to 85 million, according to United Nations (UN) estimates, despite concerted government campaigns to slow down population growth. The vast majority of Egyptians live in the limited spaces near the banks of the Nile River, in an area of

³ Wikipedia, Egypt Population Pyramid 2005.svg

⁴ Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008

about 40,000 square kilometers (15,000 sq mi), where the only arable land is found and competing with the need of human habitations.

In late 2010, around 40% of Egypt's population of just fewer than 80 million lived on the fiscal income equivalent of roughly US\$2 per day with a large part of the population relying on subsidised goods.

Moreover, according to the Population Reference Bureau's annual report in 2010⁵ two-thirds of Egyptians are under 30, and each year 700,000 new graduates chase 200,000 new jobs. With the number of new people entering the job force at about 4% a year, unemployment in Egypt is almost 10 times as high for college graduates as it is for people who have gone through elementary school, particularly educated urban youth, who are precisely those people that were seen out in the streets during the January 25 revolution. Egypt's youth are the faces behind this leaderless revolution; the revolt, in large part, was spurred by their finesse in using social media and networking to organise and make their voices heard.

Millions of young people throughout the country have been too frustrated for too long with the constraints of the government of the Ex-regime and the lack of future job prospects. The sense of hopelessness, stemming from over education and limited employment opportunities has reached a breaking point. With a corrupted government that neglected to invest in the younger generation, possibilities for the future seemed very sad. Therefore, the large population of unemployed youth was forced to work informal low paying jobs, create employment for themselves, or wait until the recession ends and their elders retire. Young people thus either end up living at home or heading back to school, with free time to grow increasingly depressed and frustrated.

The Population Reference Bureau (PRB) has also referred to the fact that 90% of the unemployed in Egypt are youth, pointing out that the situation is particularly tough for young women looking for a job.

Additionally, in the Population Council's 2009 survey⁶ conducted among youth in Egypt, 30% of males ages 15 to 29 reported that they were looking to migrate, mostly to an oil-rich Gulf state and largely because they did not expect to find work at their home country. 70% of unemployed youth said that they were jobless because there was simply no work available. Furthermore, more than 40% thought personal connections were more important than personal skills in securing a job, which was at the time of the survey or before the revolution, one reflection of the society-wide corruption that ignited the protests.

⁵ Population Reference Bureau Annual Report, 2010

⁶ Population Council Youth Survey, 2009

Furthermore, Studies of the school-to-work transition in Egypt show that young people face serious challenges in finding employment, not only because of the scarcity of jobs relative to the numbers of new students in the job market, but also because of their lack of appropriate education. On the other hand, enrollment in secondary and higher education has reached unprecedented levels for both boys and girls but without being translated into higher employment rates and wages for young people. According to the 2009 survey, less than 50% of the higher education students who have participated in the youth survey believed that their education prepared them for the labor market.

A recent report by the Egyptian Council of Ministries⁷ shows that the number of Egyptians living below the poverty line has risen from 17% in the year 2000 to 22% in the year 2010, with people living in the rural areas making up about 80% of the poor. As mentioned earlier, more than one-half of the population still lives in rural areas and accounts for majority of the country's illiterate population, estimated to be in millions. This educational deficit is also marked by a pronounced gender gap; where two-thirds of illiterate youth are female.

In short, several factors have played a part or more in bringing Egyptians out on the streets on January 25, projecting and broadcasting their upheaval and passions on to the screen for the first time since long time ago. The twitterati saw a social media revolution, the foodies saw a food price hikes at its core, others saw a hunger for democratization and human rights and other groups saw a backlash against routine torture and abuse. Amongst a full range of different drivers of change were overpopulation and youth unemployment relative to the weak economy. Reports have shown that two-thirds of Egyptians are below 30 years old, and each year 700,000 new graduates chase 200,000 new jobs, referring to the fact that 90% of the unemployed in Egypt are youth. The educated unemployed youth simply represent the people that were seen out in the streets during the January 25 revolution.

Education and Market Matching

Education and seeking job opportunities in Egypt have been a burden on the Egyptian citizens in general. This goes back to several factors, among which are: irrelevance of education to the requirements of the job market; higher supply than demand in the market; saturated public sector that is no longer perceived as a window of opportunity for employment; high demands of the private sector for employment, leaving behind many who are ineligible to apply, among other.

⁷ Egyptian Council of Ministries Report, 2010

Hence, finding a job has become really hard over the past year. Also, with the present culture of nepotism, even those who are eligible might not get an equal opportunity to compete based on fair competition. This is embedded in the culture that many get hired in positions, only because of their social networks, relationships, and/or shared interests. This has also affected the choice of investment in education of some people and whether it is really worth saving up for obtaining degrees or not. The overall education level thus decreased in (2005/6) from 76.4% to 66% in the year 2007/8. Prior to the revolution, it has been recognized that the quality of education in relation to market demand continues to be a problem. According to the Egypt Human Development Report (EDHR) of 2010⁸, 62.4% of the unemployed persons in 2007 were holders of intermediate qualifications. This strongly supports the fact that the quality of education does not match the market requirements, leaving the young unemployed when inflation was also on the rise.

Another factor is the lack of investment in vocational training, leaving small income generating industries ignored. As a result, most of the young people in Egypt who seek university degrees in the hope of finding a reasonable job opportunity end up being unemployed, causing frustration and affecting time use as the Survey of Young People 2009 suggest.

Although Egypt was also one of the least countries affected by the global financial crisis of 2009, its impact on the internal job markets and on prices was negative. Any economic problem such as unemployment was attributed to the crisis, in addition to the increased price of goods.

Wealth and Gender Gaps

One of the main demands of the revolution is social justice. There is an existent gap between the rich and the poor, which has raised debate over years about distribution of wealth in the country. About 20% of Egyptians live below the poverty line. For three decades, Egyptians have suffered from economic policies that do not have a direct tangible impact on the average citizen.

According to the Egypt Human Development Report (EDHR), the percentage of the poor increased from the year 2008 (19.6%) to 2010 (21.6%), besides the increase in the number of the absolute poor. Development practitioners had predicted that a revolution will happen, mainly because basic needs were no longer available as before. There was a problem in bread supply, a basic necessity in Egypt, and people had to wait in long lines to get this good.

Programs were designed by the government back then to address poverty in the poorest areas. One of the programs was the Poorest or the neediest 1000 villages, which was mainly used as propaganda for the son of the former president Mubarak. The government has further worked on a poverty map, based upon which public programs addressing poverty were implemented. The

⁸ Egypt Human Development Report (EDHR), 2010

poverty map identified geographic regions and groups that were in more need as well as households that suffered the most from poverty in Egypt. According to the national income and expenditure survey of 2008/9 the upward trend in the poverty rate was on the rise again as a direct result of the global financial crisis. This has a direct impact on the rates of investment, accordingly employment and economic growth, affecting the level of poverty overall. This suggests that overall poverty rates are linked to economic performance, which was not in its best condition for the three years preceding this crisis.

Besides, still persist large regional disparities between the developed areas and the Upper Rural Egypt where the population is the most deprived (43.7% of its residents are income poor). According to Survey of Young People in Egypt 2010⁹, whereas rural youth account for 59% of Egypt's total youth, they account for 85% of Egypt's poor youth. What is obvious, therefore, is that being poor is very much a characteristic of residing in rural Egypt and thus having less access to public goods and services. There is a Two-way interaction between poverty and its attributes- Lack of education and skills, and absence of decent jobs maintains poverty.

Egypt is rated number 120 among 128 countries on gender gap measurement. Full and productive employment and decent work for all remains a challenge, particularly for women and young people. The labor market remains highly gender discriminated. Women participation in the labor market is among the lowest in the world, where young women (aged 18-29) represent 18.5% of the Egyptian workforce compared to more than 50% of men. Egypt's unemployment reaches almost 23% among women and young males aged 15-24, and exceeds 60% among young females in the same age group, compared to the overall unemployment rate of approximately 9.4% in 2009. Almost 75% of jobs created between 1998 and 2006 were in the informal sector. The informal sector currently represents the main source of employment for new labor market entrants. Women's engagement in the informal sector differs from men's one.

Whereas most men in the informal sector are either wage workers or employers, Women are primarily non-wage workers contributing in various ways to household production and family businesses. Most Women in the informal sector work in agriculture or horticulture agro-business, with agriculture continuing to account for one third of all female employment. This sector, by nature, is an insecure sector, since it does not offer a work contract or social or medical insurance.

In addition, while women make important contributions to the rural economy, their productivity is limited due to lack of access to land, credit, networks, marketing and information, as well as their heavy workload due to household responsibilities. 1.1 million Women work in the informal sector, 93% of these in rural areas. In 2006, according to United Nations report entitled Arab Youth Strategizing for the Millennium Development Goals, in Egypt, 41% of adult females were

illiterate, and mostly in the rural areas of Upper Egypt. Moreover, 54% of rural Upper Egyptian girls aged 13 to 15 are not enrolled in school, compared with 11% of boys¹⁰

To summarize, education irrelevance to market demands as well as the wealth and gender gaps were of a high relevance to the outbreak of the revolution of the 25th of January. The lack of investment in vocational education and training has derived people to seek higher educational certificates, such as university education, leading to more supply in the job market, noting that official development reports that highlight the fact that education does not match market needs. The wealth gap and the disappearance of the middle class in society along with the existing gender gap and the absence of social justice, all helped in a way or another in triggering the spark of the protests on January 25th, 2011.

More factors are attributed to socio-economic and political factors. Explanations include: the rise of unemployment, the persistent rule by terror for thirty years through the emergency law, the prohibition on political rights and civil freedoms and lack of free and fair elections, police brutality against activists, the wide spread corruption, low income and rising inequality, the spread of virtual-opposition through social networking websites and the Arabic satellite, the success of the Tunisian revolution., inflation of food prices, the lack of health services. In short, the revolution is explained by the increasing density and pervasiveness of social, economic and political grievances that culminated into an uncontrollable anger towards a diminishing legitimacy of Mubarak's thirty-years-rule of the country. This was largely reflected in the main demands of the protestors that called for "democracy, freedom and social justice".

¹⁰ Labor Force Sample Survey, 2008

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