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From Great Expectations to Bitter Disappointment: Egypt's Youth, After Three Years of al-Sisi's Presidency *

Mira Tzoreff

Five years have passed since hundreds of thousands of youth first flooded Cairo's Tahrir Square with the unequivocal and uncompromising demand: "Irhal!" (Get out! Leave!) Their actions resulted in the deposition of two presidents — Husni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi — in successive revolutionary upheavals on January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013. President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi understands that Egypt's revolutionary youth are looking for more than fiery speeches and empty promises; they expect creative solutions to the youth crisis (*azmat al-shabab*). However, the Sisi regime has been forced to invest most of its efforts in the continuing battle against *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (the Islamic State-aligned organization) in the Sinai. Sisi is also searching desperately for solutions to Egypt's economic crisis, pursuing huge public projects such as the expansion of the Suez Canal. A real solution to the youth crisis is not yet in sight—particularly for the educated and unemployed, who, because of the difficult economic situation, are unable to marry and establish families. A 2013 report by the African Development Bank shows a direct link between youth unemployment and political and socio-economic instability.

Three fraught years have passed since Sisi was elected president. The 730 days of grace that he requested to implement his socio-economic road map have expired, and the hopes that the Egyptian youth had pinned on it have faded. On September 11, 2016, students burned their diplomas during a public demonstration in protest of the regime's failure to provide them with jobs that matched their skills. The statistics are not encouraging either. For example, the percentage of unemployed youth between the ages of 15 and 29 is 30 percent, and the number of unemployed youth with higher education is even higher - 34 percent. As a result, a growing number of young people are immigrating to various European countries, many of them illegally, in search of a brighter future.

Naela Gabr, the Chairwoman of the National Coordinating Committee for Combating and Preventing Illegal Migration (NCCPIM), noted that the Egyptian border police detained 3,720 illegal migrants over three months (between mid-March and the beginning of June 2016), most of whom were on their way to Europe. Moreover, the total number of youth illegally leaving Egypt in 2015 was 80,000-90,000 in comparison to 15,000 in 2009. Gabr's organization embarked on a public relations campaign — in both Arabic and English — whose slogan, "Egypt is your future," and whose goal is to warn young people of the dangers of illegal immigration. It also drafted a law, which now waits for formal parliamentary approval, defining illegal immigration and the penalties to be imposed for violation.

For the past two years, and particularly since January 2016, Sisi has wielded an iron-fist against individuals or groups critical of his policies. New laws have been adopted that greatly restrict opportunities to protest in public spaces. Sisi's former supporters among the revolutionary youth have now been branded "enemies of the nation" and even "traitors" (*khawana*). Some have been arrested and others have fled the country in fear.

Some media outlets and prominent intellectuals have spoken out against the regime's hostility towards youth activists. Egyptian author, Alaa al-Aswany, a Sisi supporter in 2013, said:

Among the leaders the regime and security services' leaders, some see the youth of the revolution as enemies...[but] if it were not for the courage shown by the demonstrators, dedicated to the country and the revolution, Sisi would not have been elected president...they are the ones who paid the price for change and let not their compensation be to be discarded in prisons, subject to inhumane laws that are contrary to the Constitution approved by the majority of the Egyptian people. What am I supposed to feel for the current regime ...[when] my son is serving four years in prison for carrying a sign in front of the journalist's association?¹

Aswany's son had been arrested at a demonstration protesting the regime's raid on the journalist's association in May 2016, ironically on UNESCO's World Press Freedom Day. Armed with pens and cameras, the demonstrators marched on the Attorney General's office waving signs declaring that "journalism is not a crime." In response to a wave of arrests of young protesters, Sisi declared that "the regime was not opposed to protests, but the protests must be conducted legally," and emphasized "that 90 percent of the arrested young people were criminals."²

¹ *al-Shorouk*, January 27, 2015.

² Egyptian TV (www.enc.eg), June 3, 2016, [via YouTube](#).

The state apparatus is also silencing youth on university campuses. In the latter half of December 2015, the minister of education's involvement in the elections for the National Student Association created a rift between the regime and Egypt's students. The association was established in 2011 and comprised of two important blocs: "The Voice of Egyptian Students" (*Sawt al-Tulab al-Misri*), which was aligned with supporters of the Sisi regime; and, the second, "January 25 Revolution" (*Thawrat-25 Yanir*), which was known for its opposition to the regime. When members of the "January 25 Revolution" bloc were elected chairman and vice-chairman of the association, the Egyptian minister of education disbanded the organization, claiming election irregularities.

Seeing this as a blow to their freedom of expression and freedom of organization, students began to protest on social media. One message noted that "the Egyptian student has become a danger to state security." The government's blatant interference in student affairs created a yawning credibility gap between the educated youth and the regime. Aware of the problem, Sisi sought to verbally mollify his youthful critics, stressing the importance of youth in building a new Egypt, and the role of universities in instilling the fundamental values of science and the Enlightenment. Speaking at a Cairo University graduation ceremony, he called on young people to participate in national projects and declared that, "I want Egypt's youth to be by my side. I love Egypt's youth and consider them my children."³ Nevertheless, the regime's interference in the National Student Association's elections was perceived as return to the practices of the Mubarak regime, deepening young people's alienation.

Sisi's decision in April 2016 to hand over the Gulf of Aqaba's islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia in exchange for economic aid in grants and loans, sparked new protests in Cairo and Alexandria.

The new protests were déjà vu in miniature. Paraphrasing the iconic 2011 revolutionary slogan, "bread, freedom, and social justice," the youthful protesters chanted, "Bread, Freedom, and the islands are Egyptian." They also shouted "Irhal!," directed at President Sisi. They even dared to question his patriotism, labeling him with the absurd nickname, "Awad," which refers to an Egyptian folk tale, in which "Awad" sells his land in exchange for money and brings shame on his family. Protesters called on young people to wake from their coma and look the stark Egyptian reality straight in the eyes. One message that was widely distributed through social media contained the following text:

³ "[El-Sisi promises bigger role for youth in Cairo University speech](#)," *Ahram Online*, September 28, 2014.

The land is our land...
 Also tomorrow...it will remain ours...
 For our families, after we are gone...
 Continue to slumber on the watch, friends...
 There is no stability here, friends...
 Millions are dying, friends...
 Young people are leaving, friends...
 Or humiliated, friends...
 Or dying, friends...
 He is nothing but a scarecrow, friends...
 They are a bunch of traitors, friends...⁴

The protesters emphasized their ability to continue the revolution that they had begun five years earlier. These latest protests, however, were not focused on social justice and the regime's disregard for the youth crisis, but on Sisi's having damaged Egyptian national honor.⁵

They have since expanded beyond the immediate question of the islands, but due to the regime's heavy-hand, they have moved from the public sphere into virtual space. Lacking any other option to express dissent, the youth once again turned to Facebook and social media. Their dominant message is the right of young people to freedom (*hurriya*), exemplified by a song from the pop-band "Cairuki," "The Last Song" (*Akhir Aghani*). The song describes the difficulties young people have faced since the 2011 revolution, and asks them not to abandon the legacy of the revolution. Its chorus declares that "if this will be the last song, I choose to sing of freedom. Say it with me out loud – freedom."⁶

An even more blunt example of the revolutionary spirit is the songs of a group of street performers, consisting of six members aged 19 to 25, who call themselves, "The Children of the Street" (*al-atfal al-shwar*). Their declared goal is to express the feelings of ordinary citizens through humor. Their song "Why do people hate you al-Sisi?," attracted 300,000 followers on the internet before the group's site was shut down. Four members of the group were arrested, prompting a broad social media campaign calling for their release.⁷ The well-known satirist Basem Youssef accused Sisi of suppressing Egyptian youth out of fear of losing power.⁸

⁴4Media, February 22, 2015 [via YouTube](#).

⁵ Ayah Aman, "Protesters return to Egypt's Streets," *al-Monitor*, April 17, 2016.

⁶ Hatem Maher, "Egypt's defiant demonstrators see light at end of tunnel: Analysis," *Ahram Online*, April 16, 2016.

⁷ They were released on September 7, 2016, as a gesture by the state ahead of Eid al-Adha.

⁸ Nourhan Fahmy, "Social Media Users Protest Detention of Members of a Young Egyptian Satirical Group," *Arab Media and Society*, May 12, 2016.

Another telling example of the ridiculing of Sisi on social media was the response to Sisi's professed declaration that if it were possible to sell himself and repay Egypt's massive debts he would do it. Uploading a post to Facebook, a young man proposed to sell Sisi on eBay: "President for sale, almost new (free shipping, no refunds).⁹ The bidding for Sisi reached more than \$100,000 before the post was removed. This kind of post reflects not only the prevailing mood among young Egyptians, but also contributes a climate of opposition to the regime and its leader.

It is too early to eulogize Egypt's youth. Those who have labeled them as tired from the 2011 and 2013 revolutions, as desperate and frustrated from the results of those revolutions, and disappointed from having placed their hopes in President Sisi, are not listening to the consistent and unequivocal messages being expressed in the street and on social media. The memory of revolution is engraved in the minds of many. These young people carry within themselves nostalgic memories of the fruits of their creation, attributing the success of the Egyptian Arab Spring to their activism in Tahrir Square. Having once shattered the barrier of fear, it would be rash to assume that they will not one day return to the barricades and again demand their rights.

Mira Tzoreff is a lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History, and a researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.

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⁹ [Egyptian Star](#) (Arabic), February 24, 2016.