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Asmar Morad Salah

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Conference Proceeding: Dynamics of Socioeconomic Protest in Egypt in the time of Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Asmar Morad Salah¹

On 2 September 2019, a video about military corruption, especially in regards to the construction of a new presidential palace, was uploaded by Mohamed Ali, an Egyptian actor and contractor who owns the construction company Amlak. Published on his personal Facebook page, the video went viral within a few days, after being viewed by millions of Egyptians. Ali and his allegations of corruption against top officials became the talk of the town, with millions awaiting his new videos. Mohamed Ali's popularity attracted the attention of the authorities as well, to the extent that they blocked the video on Facebook.

The video, however, remained online active on YouTube. The Egyptian public's substantial virtual interaction with Mohamed Ali's videotaped perspectives encouraged him to call on the masses to take to the streets on 20 September 2019. Although the public was not as mobilized in the streets or in the public sphere as they were online or in cyberspace, these dynamics worried the government authorities, pushing them to further crack down on the public sphere. Around 2800 were arrested in the weeks of late September and early October, during and after last year's demonstrations.²

This new political climate reflects a fundamental shift in the nature of protesting and dissent of in Egypt, which has evolved in its specific manifestations over the last several years due to the crackdown on civil society and the violent closure of the public sphere. From that we can see the rising significance of online calls for protests, on social media or on streaming websites like YouTube, which have become an alternative virtual public space where individuals can organize and voice dissent.

The Facebook page 'Kolena Khalid Said' [We Are All Khaled Said] had a pivotal role in Egypt's January 2011 revolution. Yet unlike the videos of Mohamed Ali, the majority of the content on Khaled Said page targeted specific segments of the Egyptian population, namely the educated middle class. Mohamed Ali, in contrast, has been able to reach wider and more diverse segments of the population. In his videos, Ali employs slang and working class language, asserting himself to be a "man of the people." In perhaps the most well-known remark in his videos, Mohamed Ali positioned his suffering as one with the suffering of the masses: "We suffer, and they ask us to be patient and endure as he [Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi] builds palaces for himself and his wife."

Mohamed Ali raised issues of inequality and social justice in a different medium and on a wider scale, attracting the so-called everyday man on the street. This raises an important question: Does the popularity of Ali's videos indicate resurgence of social and economic demands as the most important to Egypt's citizens, superseding their concerns about terrorism and state security?

In her prominent study on authoritarianism, Hannah Arendt points to the emergence of the "man of the public" who becomes an inspiring leader.³ Alain Touraine argues that totalitarianism is based on domination, and on defining patriotism and the state vis-à-vis defining what constitutes society and social.⁴ It is worth mentioning that the authoritarian government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, since its founding, has been highly dependent upon the rhetoric of "protecting the Egyptian state from collapse." Through this nationalist rhetoric, Sisi constructed a persona of himself as "the man of the masses" who protected the Egyptian state from the "danger of collapse."

This paper analyses the most important transformations witnessed by socioeconomic protests in 2013, 2015, and 2018. By understanding transformations in the nature, demands, and forms of protest in Egypt during these years, one is aided in not only understanding the political context in Egypt, but also in predicting the future of social movements under authoritarianism governance. The totalitarian framework, we postulate, has collapsed at the symbolic and discursive level. The socio-economic pressure accompanying the government's austerity measures, imposed under deteriorating economic conditions in which the majority of Egyptians face a decline in their incomes and quality of life, has led to a revival of, and increase in, protests motivated by socioeconomic demands. And finally, we aim to prove that the Egyptian government's closure of the physical, public space has led to the expansion of virtual or cyberspace as a medium for protesting and expressing dissent.

This paper is reliant on three reports from the Social Justice Platform (SJP) and the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR) monitoring protests in three different years: 2013, 2015, and 2018.⁵ The data collection methodology used in these reports was initiated by ECESR and developed by the SJP, to collect data on labour, economic, and social protests. The data collection methodology is primarily dependent on media reports from an array of outlets including governmental, independent, and privately-owned.

The Socio-Economic Context⁶

Before delving into the particularities of the protest movement in Egypt and its significance, it is imperative for the reader to be familiarized with the socio-economic context in which the protests took place. The context refers to the socio-economic policies adopted by the current government and the results it envisions. Indeed, it is well known that the Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi follows a neoliberal agenda that advocates, as general policy, diminished social spending (public disinvestment) alongside an augmented role for the private sector, and higher levels of deregulation and freedom for capital.

In adopting a neoliberal economic framework, Egypt is similar to all other states in the region, which follow the precepts of neoliberal ideology. Yet the Egyptian experience is unique in

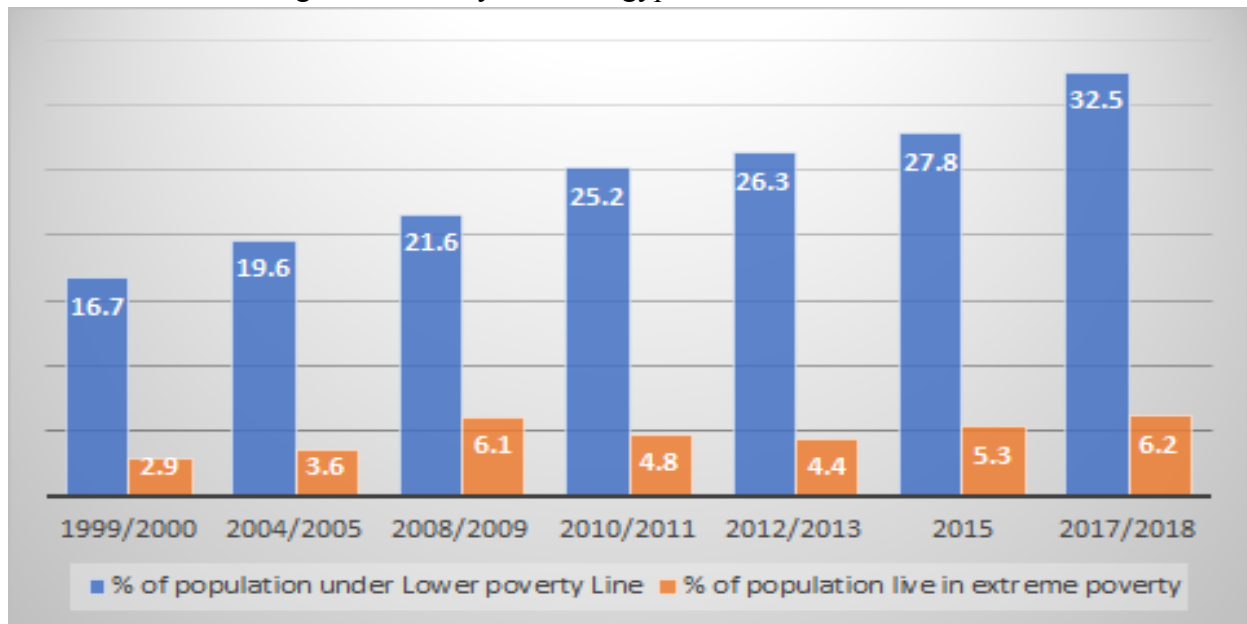
regards to the accelerated pace with which the process of neoliberalisation is taking place. This rapid process is obscured by nationalistic rhetoric that tries to draw parallels between the current state under Sisi and the post-colonial state under former president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Yet substantial differences exist, primary among which are the current government's focus on catering to the demands of the international market at the expense of local needs.⁷ Taking these considerations into mind, it would be illogical to conceive of the current Egyptian government's project as genuinely developmental.

Similarly, it is important to understand the relation between the catastrophic consequences of the neoliberal agenda and the speed with which it is being implemented. Neoliberal policy is expected to negatively impact the living standards of the masses. The Sisi government is thus rapidly escalating repressive policies and practices, in order to pre-empt any potential for popular mobilization spurred by the widespread feelings of fear and disappointment among the masses. Citizens are left with no time or opportunity to organize and mount serious opposition.

A clear example of the dilemma above is Egypt's acceptance of a US\$ 12 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2016.⁸ As part of this agreement, the Egyptian government agreed to all of the IMF's conditions,⁹ including a gradual increase in energy subsidies¹⁰ and the implementation of a 13% Value Added Tax (VAT);¹¹ conditions that, when implemented, combined to raise the cost of living significantly. Not only was the cost of basic commodities raised but also the cost of transportation, leaving little opportunity for ordinary working-class citizens to survive.

As a matter of fact, the 2019 report on income and expenditure,¹² published by the state owned Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) shows that the proportion of people living in Egypt below the poverty line (estimated at approximately 735.5 EGP monthly) increased from 27.8% of the total population in 2015 to 32.5% in 2017/2018. In other words, over the last three years, there has been an increase of an additional five million people living in poverty. Furthermore, the rate of hunger or extreme poverty (a monthly income of approximately 461 EGP) has increased from 5.3 to 6.2% throughout the same period (see Figure no 1).

Figure 1: Poverty rates in Egypt between 1999 and 2018



Source: Based on the data from CAPMAS, 2019. ¹³

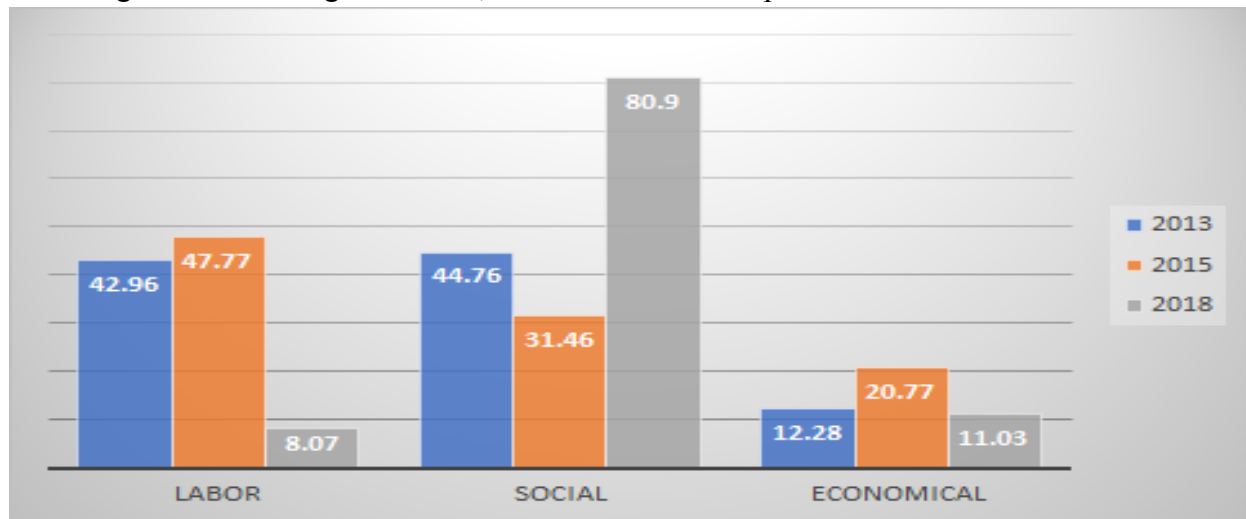
Trends in Labour, Social, and Economic Protests: 2013, 2015, and 2018

When analysing protest movements in Egypt from 2013 to 2018, the main observation that can be deduced is a decrease in labour protests,¹⁴ beginning in 2013 and continuing until 2018. Social protests¹⁵ topped the list in 2013, then significantly decreased in 2015, and returned to the top in 2018. Meanwhile, economic protests¹⁶ maintained the same level relatively.

The decrease in labour protests can be explained by the rapid closure of the public sphere by Egypt's new authoritarian government after the 2013 military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi. The state increased restrictions on independent trade union activities, quelling any possibility of an organised labour movement.

The rise in social protests can be explained by their spontaneity together with their focus on diverse, specific, and local demands. The increase in social protests over this five-year period (2013-18) is arguably relatable to state austerity policies towards facilities and services, which afflicts the infrastructure and services provided to citizens. This increase in labour, social and economic protests should be viewed in respect to the aforementioned CAPMAS report on income and expenditure, which showed a rise in poverty between 2015 and 2018.

Figure 2: Percentage of labour, social and economic protests between 2013 and 2018



Source: Based on the data from the 2013 and 2015 Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), and the 2018 Social Justice Platform (SJP) report.

Methods of Protesting

Unlike the labour protests, economic and social acts of protest take a variety of forms according to the types of the demands, and limits to organisation and movement. Four basic observations can be made about the forms of protests documented between 2013 and 2018 (See Table no. 1). The first is the significant decline in acts of road blocking, the most common form of protest in 2013. The second is the continuation of sit-ins and demonstrations as a basic form of protest, despite the increased restrictions and tightened control of public sphere. The third is a dramatic rise in self-harm as a means of protest; a manifestation of structural violence so deep-rooted that it compels individuals to harm themselves.

There is a final observation that should be made about the methods by which Egyptians express dissent, grievances and demands: in 2018, the majority of protests consisted of filing complaints or issuing statements. This can be explained, to a great extent, by the crackdown on the public sphere alongside the development and expansion of virtual or cyberspace, including the democratization of internet usage after 2011,¹⁷ In 2009, there were 12.28 million internet users; this number nearly quadrupled in 2018, reaching 49.23 million users. Active social media users in 2018 numbered 39 million, representing 40% of Egypt's total population.¹⁸

Table 1: Primary methods of social and economic protest in 2013, 2015, and 2018

Methods of protest	2013	2015	2018
Road blocking	878	61	16
Occupying public offices/ Detaining employees/ Destroying public property	182	6	4
Sit-ins / Demonstrations / Marches	251	618	190
Spontaneous gatherings	--	140	--
Strikes	137	20	32
Suicide attempts / Self-harm	8	27	89
Filing complaints or issuing statements	--	28	1868

Source: Based on the data from the 2013 and 2015 Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), and the 2018 Social Justice Platform (SJP) report.

Types of Protesters

In 2013, the main segments of the population participating in social protests were civilians and students, with the former leading 1376 protests, while the latter led 442 protests. Taxi drivers and car owners were prominent instigators of economic protests, holding 230 demonstrations, followed by farmers leading 72, bakery owners 64, and fishermen 29. Social and economic protests in 2013 were driven by the energy crisis followed by the food production crisis, according to 2013 ECESR report.

In 2015, civilians and students also constituted the largest categories of groups leading social protests, with the former leading 409 and the latter 188 social protests. Protests held by taxi drivers fell to 64. Protests held by the unemployed dropped to 106, and protests led by peasants to 37. In 2018, parents represented the group most demanding of social and economic rights groups, comprising 95% of the social and economic protest groups, followed by students and farmers.

The return of civilians as central to the sphere of protest and its demands represents a fundamental transformation in the public space, and it also shows the attempts of civilians to find secure spaces among themselves, from where they are able to voice their anger towards various forms of injustice. It is true that these civilian protests are not organised, and individual protesters are not strongly connected to each other. In this fragmented climate, it is difficult to network and

build up movements in the short term. In the long term, however, these fragmented protests will become increasingly effective resistance against hegemony and centralised state control.

The Rights Demanded

Regarding the rights demanded by Egyptian protesters in 2013, 2015, and 2018, the right to security is a fundamental issue, despite an improved security situation leading to its significant decline in importance after 2013. The demand for healthcare was also raised more frequently by protesters in 2018, along with an elevated demand for environmental rights. Environmental protests have only recently begun to be documented in a systematic manner in Egypt.

The demand for infrastructure and public services has dramatically increased from 2015 to 2018. The elevated importance of this demand can be explained by the austerity measures resulting from the IMF loan, and by the widespread forms of claims associated with citizens' rights, termed as 'citizenship-based protests' by anthropology professor Reem Saad. In a recent study, Saad explained the shift to citizenship-based protests in the Egyptian countryside, as demands became no longer limited to issues of agricultural production but have also expanded to include demands for improved quality of life and wellbeing.¹⁹

Table 2: Classifications of claims and rights invoked in 2013, 2015, and 2018

Demands	2013	2015	2018
The right to security	369	n/d	178
The right to justice	709	106	--
The right to education	292	236	193
The right to infrastructure and services	884	160	1110
The right to housing	90	n/d	40
The right to health	66	29	116
The right to work	n/d	11	--
Environmental rights	--	--	123

Source: Based on the data from the 2013 and 2015 Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), and the 2018 Social Justice Platform (SJP) report.

2018 Protests: Despite the Crackdown, Dissent is Alive

Amid the ongoing restrictions on civil rights, press freedoms, and the ability to organise either socially or politically since 2013, the year 2018 scored a remarkable count of 2502 protests (39.33% more than 2017). Protests for civil demands were most prominent, as civilians demanded services such as proper access to health, housing, education, water, roads, and sanitation. People also protested against rising living costs, especially soaring food prices. These ‘civilian protesters’ accounted for 77.90% of all protesting groups this year. Workers came second, with nearly 154 industrial acts of protest, and accounting for 6.16% of the total. Next came students (89 protests, 3.56% of the total), and employees in various sectors (64, 2.56%).

This brings us to the most prominent demands of Egyptian protesters nationwide. The most demanded right in 2018 was the right to accessible and functional infrastructure and public services (1140 protests). The capital city of Cairo came first with 440 protests in 2018, marking 17.59% of the year’s protests. This is hardly surprising, considering Cairo’s population of 19.5 million people.

459 protests took place in the impoverished Upper Egypt collectively: Minya, Assiut, Sohag, Luxor, Beni Sueif, Aswan, and Qena, accounting for 18.34% of the country’s total protests. Meanwhile, in the Sinai Peninsula, which is divided into a North and South governorate, taken together with the Red Sea governorate, only 25 protests were documented, marking 0.88% of the country’s total protests.

Labour Protests

It can be argued that the current Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has learned from the past, and has accordingly begun utilising all its powers and resources to suppress any labour movement or other form of organisation among workers. The government saw that a siege against independent organised labour was needed. With this siege in place, the state-affiliated Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), as well as the Press, Engineers, and Lawyers syndicates, made a comeback to the political scene, acting as the state’s representative for workers or professionals. Thus, these unions are spearheaded by individuals subservient to state interests, and they voice nationalist, pro-state rhetoric while striving to eliminate any space to express dissenting and even independent or apolitical opinions.

The state’s co-optation of labour movements was followed by its issuance, in 2017, of Egypt’s new labour unions law.²⁰ The legislation triggered criticism from the International Labour Organization (ILO),²¹ as the law was accused of siding with the ETUF and abolishing the rights of independent syndicates.

276 labour protests were documented in 2018, accounting for 11.03% the year’s protests. When analysing the nature of protest movements in Egypt over the last five years, an ongoing decrease in labour protests is easily observable – from 2239 labour protests in 2013, to 1609 protests in 2014, then 933 in 2015, 751 in 2016, 450 in 2017, and finally, 276 in 2018.

Economic Protests

In 2018, 202 economic protests were documented, marking an 8.07 percentage of the year's protests. Protests per month averaged at 17 and peaked at 22 twice: once in June, concurrent with a new wave of price hikes in essential food goods, fuel, gas, diesel, and transportation, and then again in September.

The categories of civilians and farmers collectively held 38 economic protests, 25 of which demanded government interference to renovate roads and bridges, purify agriculture water and/or allow it to reach their lands, or issue medicine for cattle. Some of them protested the lack of governmental facilities, like water or infrastructure, and some protested time-torn sewage facilities or an abundance of snakes in their agriculture lands. All these grievances affected the process of agriculture, either by harming the crops, the farmers themselves, or their access to the land—hence affecting their livelihoods.

As for drivers, two factors made them a distinguished protesting group in the past years—a phenomenon calling for a more detailed (and possibly extensive anthropological) research. The first factor was the series of price hikes resulting from the government's decision to raise subsidized government-set fuel prices. The second factor was the vast expansion of peer-to-peer commuting like Uber and Careem, modern mobile-based taxi services allowing riders to order a car directly to their location through the power of GPS. These two factors compelled white taxi drivers to protest, while the first of them alone motivated microbus and minibus drivers to protest as well.

In 2018, protests were staged by drivers demanding the government to increase the tariffs of the ride. And with each price hike, tariff increases are always late to be issued, leading to fights, arguments, and strikes among the drivers and passengers. These protests often include acts of striking, halting work, gathering, or threatening to strike. Strikes calling for governmental approval of higher tariffs took place this year in Beni Sueif, Damanhour, Luxor, Daqahliya, Qalyubiya, Fayoum, Minufiya, and Kafr al-Sheikh.

Suicide, which we categorize under self-harm, witnessed an alarming increase in 2018. This year, the SJP documented 57 suicides and three failed attempts. All reports of these cases cited financial hardships, and victims ranged from government employees to skilled labourers, workers, shop owners, unemployed individuals, drivers, civilians, street vendors, students, craftsmen, and farmers.

Added to these 57 cases were another 22 cases documented under social protests, raising the suicide count to 79. These 22 cases were all students, committing suicide due to exam anxiety, dissatisfaction with or anxiety about their grades, or perceived lack of test preparation.

Social Protests

Citizens have not ceased demanding their rights, particularly in times of austerity and decreasing quality of services, despite growing restrictions on various methods of protests. Foremost among

these restrictions is the 2013 Protest Law (act 107 of 2013), which resulted in the criminalization of virtually all marches, demonstrations, and means of expressing dissent.

Dozens of protests in 2018 were intertwined with price hikes. Most prominently, several demonstrations took place in May in metro stations—to protest the ticket price increase—in which 20 people were arrested and referred to the country’s state security prosecutor.

‘Filing a complaint, a police report, or issuing a public statement’ were the most frequently utilised methods of protest in 2018 with 1968 incidents of protest, a solid majority of which consisted of filing complaints and reports.

This high number is arguably the result of two factors. The first factor is the safety and security offered by petitions, reports, or statements when expressing demands. A large number of people are able to voice a concern, demand, or grievance without having to be physically present on the streets. This aids them in avoiding security harassment or legal prosecution.

The second factor is the increasing number of newspapers and media outlets providing a forum for readers to “complain” or report problems in their localities. Outlets adopting this more interactive approach include popular newspapers like the state-owned *al-Ahram*, and the privately-owned *Youm7*, *al-Watan*, and *Veto*.

Conclusion

In this paper, we give a holistic description and analysis for the number, forms and distribution of socio-economic needs in Egypt in 2013, 2015, and 2018. We observed the transformation of the types of struggles and their geographical distribution.

Although social and economic protests have become more geographically limited under the pressure exerted by Egypt's authoritarian government, these protests have not disappeared. In virtual or cyberspace, they have instead expanded, becoming more active. Unlike labour protests, economic and social protests have a margin of movement that allows them to take different forms and places according to the nature of their demands. They use local social networks to protect the protests and negotiate demands with the state,

Even given the continuing and widespread protests, the possibilities for networking between these micro-level protests are becoming increasingly limited, considering protesters' difficulties in regards to movement within and between governorates. State security also monitors virtual space, conducting internet surveillance and spying on activists' accounts. Internet surveillance has become a weapon frequently used by the Sisi government to prevent the emergence of a large social movement.

In the first half of 2019, the SJP team documented 1,303 protests, in which the Egyptians used a diversity of tools to show their dissatisfaction with their economic and social circumstances, 1,145 of which were via filing complaints or issuing statements. As previously argued, the closure of the physical public sphere led to the expansion of cyberspace/virtual space as a medium for protesting and reclaiming space. However, on 20 September 2019, the amount of silenced grievances flared up into rare and sudden anti-government demonstrations throughout the country.

The SJP team is continuing to document and verify protests. By continuing to document the number of protests, the team believes, it will be shown that the protest movement in Egypt has not ended, and its transformation into a large social movement has not become impossible.

Acknowledgements

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¹ For security reasons, the co-authors agreed to publish this article under a single pseudonym.

² According to the estimate by the legal unit of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), accessed on 30 September 2019, <https://is.gd/Sz03iy>.

³ Arendt, Hannah (2016) 'Totalitarianism,' (translated by Antoine Abu Zeid), Dar Al Saqi, Beirut, (2nd edition).

⁴ Doucet, David (2018) 'Grand entretien avec Alain Touraine : Nous risquons d'être emportés par ce courant populiste,' *Les Inrocks*, 28 November.

⁵ 2013 represents the start of the military rule of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his regime after toppling Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. 2015 represents the year in which al-Sisi's regime started to implement many of its freedom-restricting laws and regulations; it is a year that witnessed a massive crackdown on activists, politicians, and civilians from diverse backgrounds. 2018 is the last documented year researched by the SJP team.

⁶ We use the term socio-economic instead of regularly used economic policies as we believe that all economic decisions have a social basis and consequently, have social ramifications. In a word, economic policies are not carried out in a vacuum or separate from the society in which they are introduced.

⁷ (2019) For an analysis of the regime's financials and budgetary position, mainly the debt-financing of the so-called mega-nationalist projects, see 'Min d'aam al-mahroqat l d'aam al-moqawalat: tahleemashro'aamuwazanah 2019/2020' [From subsidising hydrocarbon products to subsidising constructions: an analysis to the 2019/2020 budget project], *Social Justice Platform*, accessed 21 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/31LHG1I>.

⁸ International Monetary Fund (2016) 'IMF executive board approves US\$12 billion extended arrangement under the extended Fund facility for Egypt', 11 November, accessed 22 September 2019, <https://is.gd/EeKuGQ>.

⁹ The IMF is rumoured to have asked for the implementation of the VAT before signing the agreement with the Egyptian government.

¹⁰ Accordingly, the cost of electricity and gasoline rose by 40 and 30% respectively in 2016 alone. See Esterman, Isabel (2016) 'Brace yourselves for higher electricity prices,' *Mada Masr*, August 10, accessed 25 September 2019, <https://is.gd/Wwaaqud>.

¹¹ Later, it rose to 14%, except for 57 exempted items. See Farahat, Ahmed (2017) 'No increase in prices of cigarettes and oils after increasing VAT to 14%: El Monayer' *Daily News Egypt*, July 2, accessed 10 January 2019, <https://is.gd/7RCsuD>.

¹² CAPMAS (2019) 'Ahammoashertbahs al-dakhlwa al-infaqwa al-istehlak (1 October 2017-30 September 2018),' [The income, expenditure and consumption survey's main indicator (1 October 2017-30 September 2018)].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Labour protests are mostly concerned with the relationship between employees and employers, regardless of the type enterprise, whether private, informal, government, or public. Protests vary in demands; from demanding late salaries or incentives, demanding wage increases to protesting against rising prices, deteriorating working conditions or maltreatment by officials. Methods of protests may include demonstrating, striking, blocking roads, or occupying places of work.

¹⁵ Social protests reflect the general deterioration of services provided to citizens, which are related to the sectors of health, education, utilities, housing and security. Unquestionably, dissent against deteriorating utilities is intertwined with environmental and water related issues, such cutting off potable water, polluted canal water, and factories

dumping waste into the Nile. Social protests take place all over the country and are not linked by time or geography, but staged without prior organisation by citizens.

¹⁶Economic protests are mostly linked to government policies and their effects on the economic interests of various groups; such as private taxi drivers, small business owners, artisans, street vendors, journalists, lawyers, farmers, or even graduates who demand job creation. The last five years witnessed a series of economic policies that put pressure on citizens and workers, including inflationary measures, such as the expansion of the consumption tax through the Value Added Tax Act, the liberalization of the exchange rate, and the raising of the price of energy and fuel.

¹⁷Reda, Lolwa (2018) 'Analysis: What are Egyptians using the internet for?' *Egypt Today*, 30 May, accessed 20 September 2019, <https://is.gd/sxmE8Q>.

¹⁸Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 'Measuring the Digital Society in Egypt: Internet at a Glance Statistical Profile 2015' <https://is.gd/Q1dzaN> accessed 20 September 2019, <https://is.gd/Q1dzaN>.

¹⁹Saad, Reem (2016) 'Before the Spring: Shifting Patterns of Protest in Rural Egypt,' in Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, (UK: Oxford University Press).

²⁰(2017) [Al-Sisi Approves Egypt's New Labour Unions Law], *Youm7*, 18 December, accessed 10 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YJWZYc>.

²¹Mada Masr (2017) 'Egypt Blacklisted Again by International Labour Organization,' 7 June, accessed 10 March 2019, <https://is.gd/moEqUO>.