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Demographic Surprises Foreshadow Change in Neoliberal Egypt

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In the Egypt of 2008, half the population has known only one president, Husni Mubarak. And the rate of population growth, at its peak when Mubarak assumed office in 1981, has stopped declining as it had been in the 1990s. A new kind of population increase has begun. Such are the lessons of the provisional results of the Egyptian general population and housing census, conducted in November 2006 in accordance with the regular ten-year cycle. These demographic surprises have important implications for the stability of Egypt and the regimes economic liberalization and structural adjustment program.

One might question, for example, the assumption that simply enrolling more girls in school will necessarily push fertility rates down for good. Combined with Islamic traditionalists' campaigns against women working, economic restructuring has greatly reduced women's job opportunities in the public sector and led to state disinvestment in women's schooling, contributing to impoverishment, degradation and population increase.

The stubborn growth also underlines the urgency of three continuing crises: the persistent lack of affordable housing, the ongoing enlargement of the work force and the mass reliance upon low-paying, benefits-free jobs in the informal sector, and the unsustainable geographic concentration of the population in a very small part of Egyptian territory. Under Mubarak, the government has spent billions to build desert mega-settlement around Cairo, on the seacoasts and in the invented "Second Nile Valley" plowed through the Sahara. But these projects house very few people, while the booming working-class population takes shelter in self-constructed settlements in the same areas of Egypt that have been most densely populated throughout history. Rather than migrating into the cities close to their jobs, Egyptians are resorting to daily commuting from villages, which are becoming conurbations without urban qualities, or "ruralopolises"¹.

These gender and geographic contradictions of Egypt's neoliberal political economy suggest that issues of population in Egypt are best seen through a pragmatic lens, and not through the polemics of Islamist moralism or state security hysteria.

A Boomlet after the Boom

In keeping with demographic trends evident since the 1980s, the last decade was marked by a slight drop in the rate of population growth, roughly matching the level measured at the last census. The most immediate consequence of this rate of growth is that between 1996 and 2000, the population of Egypt grew by 13.3 million people. This number is equal to the total number of Egyptians in 1917. During the preceding census period (1986-1996), the population grew by 11 million people, compared with 11.6 million people between 1976 and 1986. The negative growth rate during this period, viewed in terms of absolute numbers, was unique in the demographic history of modern Egypt. In the last ten years, by contrast, we have witnessed considerable population growth (more than 2.3 million more people in terms of absolute numbers), indicating that the downturn in population growth has slowed.

With a total of 72.6 million inhabitants, Egypt now surpasses Iran's 70 million peoples; despite having 20 times less habitable land (Egypt has 35,000 square kilometers as compared to 730,000 in Iran). If this trend continues, in ten years, the Egyptian population will have topped that of Turkey (currently are 74 million).

The average growth rate of the population between 1996 and 2006 was 2.05%, as compared with 2.08% for the previous decade and 2.8% for the period between 1976 and 1986. The decrease in growth rate is thus a good deal less during the most recent decade than the preceding one. Moreover, since the preliminary results identify 3.9 million Egyptians living abroad, compared with 2.18 million in 1996 and

2.25 million in 1986 (1.4 million in 1976), the demographic growth from 1996-2006 was even stronger since the number of Egyptians living abroad remained stable during the preceding census period (1986-1996) and it grew by 1.72 million during the last ten years. Even if we attribute a part of this increase to the natural growth of the Egyptian population living abroad (on the order of 480,000 people in ten years, for a growth rate of 2 percent per year), we still see an increase of the Egyptian population during the last decade by 1.3 million people. Thus, the total population can be said to have grown by 14.6 million inhabitants in ten years. If we take into account those 1.3 million Egyptians newly living abroad, not only does the growth rate not diminish between 1986-1996 and 1996-2006, but it can also be said to have increased by 2.2 percent per year.

One factor mitigating against the general tendency toward negative population growth has been an increase in life expectancy from an average of 55 years in 1975 to 70.6 in 2004. But the primary factor is the entry into reproductive years of the female population born during the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, when the birth rate had not yet begun to fall. The population boomlet is not simply a natural consequence of an increase in the number of Egyptians capable of bearing children. These women came of age at precisely the time when the Mubarak regime's downsizing of the public sector had blocked the main avenue their mothers and older sisters took to stable employment. Pushed back into marginal livelihoods, these women have likely borne more children so that there are more family members to sustain the household.

Under Pressure

The changing age distribution of the Egyptian population is quite clear in the data from 1986-1996 (see table 1). The significant reduction in mortality has also resulted in noticeable growth in the group of those aged 45 and above: Their numbers had increased by 4.8 million by the end of the period.

From 2000 to 2006 (the period when children from 0-6 were born) we observe an increase in the birth rate, due to the very large increase in the cohort of women who are between 15 and 45 years old (3.3 million more in 2006 than in 1996). The cohort of children between 0 and 6 years old grew by nearly 1.3 million children during this time compared to 1986-1996 when it diminished by 360,000.

Table 1: Changing distribution of the population according to age group, 1996-2006

	1996		2006		Annual % change	
	1996	2006	Distribution% 1996	Distribution% 2006	% change	Absolute change
0-6	8,937,224	10,224,256	15.1	14.1	1.35	1,287,032
6-10	5,508,051	5,043,247	9.3	6.9	-0.88	-464,804
10-15	7,864,002	7,796,386	13.3	10.7	-0.09	-67,616
15-45	27,360,320	34,983,045	46.2	48.2	2.49	7,622,725
45-60	6,194,978	9,978,402	10.5	13.7	4.88	3,783,424
> 60 years	3,412,097	4,553,694	5.8	6.3	2.93	1,141,597
TOTAL	59,276,672	72,579,030	100.0	100.0	2.05	13,302,358

One positive element of this picture is that the number of school-age young people (between 6 and 15 years old) has remained stable for the first in the history of Egypt. Hence, there is a favorable climate for the improvement of education, from rates of retention to the modernization of equipment. That said, the last ten years of structural adjustment have also been marked by stagnant education budgets. With the significant increase in the number of adults in the country, moreover, the pressures on the job and housing markets are intense.

The working-age population, those between 16 and 60 years old, grew by 1.3 million people. The potential demand for jobs from this group alone was thus equal to the total population of Cairo in 1996 or half of the working-age population in 1976. Egypt faces an impossible equation: Under-employment and poverty must rise, since the public sector has been shrunk and the selloff of state factories has not succeeded at creating the requisite replacement jobs in the private sector. A recent study shows that concurrent with the decline of employment opportunities in the public sector, the trend toward informalization of the labor market, begin in the 1990's is continuing unabated. By 2006, 6 percent of all employment was informal, up from 57 percent in 1998. Moreover, 75 percent of new entrants into the labor market in the first five years of this decade were entering into informal work." Only the service sector has been able to absorb the workers displaced by the destruction of public-sector jobs. The unemployment rate has actually decreased, from 11.7 per cent in 1998 to 8.3 percent in 2006, but at the cost of the quality of employment. Most households today cope with job insecurity low-wage work and inflation. Domestic consumption is lifeless.

Along similar lines, there are 17.3 million households in 2006, 4.5 million more than in 1996. In 1996, there were 29 million men (over 18 years of age) and women over 16 years of age) who were married, 8 million more than ten years previously (compared with an increase of 3.8 million during the decade 1986-1996).

The pressure on the housing market has thus increased, even if the annual rate of marriage is trending toward decline. The state is moving away from building public housing; while real estate developers are moving toward high-end markets and speculation, and so popular demand is satisfied by an informal market that produces modest buildings of three or four stories even in the smallest of villages. The majority of the population, having no alternative, is currently living in such illegal, « haphazard » settlements (the literal translation of their Arabic moniker, *'ashwa'iyat*)³. These popular encroachments became the norm in the 1990s, when public land was privatized and given over to real estate speculation and the construction of wealthy gated communities by few big contractors. State contestation of the *'ashwa'iyat* is very rare, and some are even being legalized in accordance with a liberal perspective on land titling and enlargement of the land and real estate market. The proliferation of illegal settlements could not be stopped without disrupting the course of economic liberalization; they became, for instance, a substantial market for the cement and steel tycoons who had also been big beneficiaries of privatization. The popular quarters of the largest cities and provincial towns are also flourishing markets as they totally lack public services. The masses are reliant upon private initiatives for schooling and access to health care: They have passed from dependency on the whims of the regime to dependency on the whims of the market. Otherwise, only the Islamist charitable societies are offering support to the population, at the same time giving a potential social stabilization net to the regime and posing a possible challenge to its claims of legitimacy.

Table 2: number of households and number of units of lodging

	1986	1996	2006	Variation 1986-96	Variation 1996-06	Rate of variation 1986-96	Rate of variation 1996-06
Households	9,718,663	12,722,974	17,265,567	3,004,311	4,542,593	3.1	2.7
Units	11,282,967	18,841,471	27,786,857	7,555,504	8,945,386	5.3	4.0
Difference	1,564,304	6,118,497	10,521,290	4,554,193	4,402,793		

Even as the housing crisis deepens, the licensed production of private housing units routinely surpasses demand (see table 2). The census counted 10.6 million more dwellings than households in 2006, compared with 1.1 in 1976. In other words, in Egypt more than 10.5 million housing units sit empty—the clearest proof of the inegalitarian manner in which the revenues generated by the *infitah* have been invested since the 1980s.

As was also the case between 1986 and 1996, between 1996 and 2006 newly built housing exceeded the number of households by 4.4 million units. These results reveal the large demographic disequilibrium and uneven distribution of wealth that weigh upon the social, economic and political wellbeing of Egypt.

In the face of these pressing social needs, the regime holds on to its power through authoritarian measures alone while popular outrage simmers. We need only to think of the problem of the increased need for food generated by an additional 13 million inhabitants, when half of the demand for wheat in the country is met by purchases on the international markets and bilateral aid.

Concentration

Besides structural adjustment and economic liberalization, the last decade was also marked by the pursuit of development megaprojects intended to redistribute population, notably the "Peace Canal" in northern Sinai and the perimeter of Toshka to the West of Lake Nasser. Added to this is the boom of investment in the tourist industry along the Red Sea, in the provinces of the Red Sea and South Sinai. With the announcement of the preliminary results from the 2006 census, the authorities were pleased to show high rates of demographic growth in these new areas, in which they have invested heavily.

That said, the cumulative demographic growth of the desert provinces accounts for only 3.5 percent of the total growth in Egypt since 2006. To be sure, this is one percentage point higher than during the two preceding decades, but that translates into only 470,000 people out of 13.3 million.

In short, since 1917, the proportion of the population from desert regions has grown from 0.3 percent to 1.8 percent of the total population—a veritable drop in the bucket. What is more, the majority of occupants in the provinces of the Red Sea and South Sinai are men, indicating weak prospects for long-term development in these areas dedicated to international tourism (in the Red Sea capital, Hurghada, there are 106,000 men and only 54,000 women). For the majority of the male migrant workers, the desert is only a temporary relocation either in the service of capital accumulation or for the benefit of families in the Nile Valley or the Delta.

More than 98 percent of the population of Egypt lives in the Delta and the Nile Valley, as always. Moreover, the provinces where the government focused its land reclamation projects, such as Sharqiyya and Buhayra, are seeing reductions in their rates of population growth as compared to the previous decade. The provinces' large plots of irrigated land attract only a temporary influx of workers at harvest time. Only the region of Port Said can be said to have a noticeable acceleration in its rate of population growth, due to the improvement projects on the lakes to the West and east of the Suez Canal at the opening of the Peace Canal. Isma'iliyya has also still maintained a relatively elevated rate of growth.

The densification of the Delta and the Nile Valley, therefore, remains the norm. The average density is currently 2,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, compared with 1,700 in 1796. Outside of urban governorates, the average density is 1,630 in the Delta and 1,830 in the Nile Valley. In ten years' time, an average of 300 more people will inhabit each square kilometer - an Asiatic geographic distribution rather than a Middle Eastern one.

For the first time in 150 years, the provinces to the south of Greater Cairo are experiencing marked growth. In the middle of the nineteenth century, almost half of the population lived in Upper Egypt, but since the 1960s less than 30 percent have lived there. Between 1976 and 2006, however, the percentage has gone from 28.4 percent to 28.7 percent, a sign of a more slowly declining birthrate (if not a stagnating one), a falling mortality rate and a slowdown in emigration. On the other hand, the percentage of the population in the Delta continued to decrease. Moving from 42.4 percent to 41.6 percent, while the Canal Zone returned to numbers it had not seen since the 1967 war, with 2.8 percent of the Egyptian population. The percentage of the Egyptian population living in Greater Cairo, which includes the governorates of Cairo, Giza and Qalyubiyya, has increased to 25.2 percent in 2006, after having decreased slightly between 1986 and 1996. This rise can be accounted for by growth in the area's formerly rural outer regions, since the area defined as urban in Greater Cairo remained stable with 18 percent of the Egyptian population.

The rate of growth of Greater Cairo, at 2.09 percent, has become markedly stronger than in the rest of Egypt, at 1.9 percent. Satellite cities in the desert, once ghost towns, are quietly showing signs of life, having absorbed some 417,000 inhabitants between 1996 and 2006. By now provide accommodations to 13.5 percent of Greater Cairo's population, as compared with 3.1 percent ten years ago, but these new towns account for only 10 percent of the total demographic growth of the three governorates. The densely packed informal outskirts house the vast majority.

Interestingly, Cairo's share of the Greater Cairo population continues to diminish in comparison to Giza and Qalyubiyya. The Cairo governorate did experience a revival of population growth, moving from 1.2 percent to 1.7 percent, due to the new development in the direction of the Eastern Desert. Nevertheless, its growth remains weak, a sign of continued absolute demographic decline of the ancient city center and increased migration toward Giza and Qalyubiyya. Central and old Cairo lost something like 297,000 inhabitants over the last decade.

Alexandria has also experienced a significant revival of population growth. Having dropped to 1.2 percent per year between 1786 and 1976, the rate rebounded to 2.1 percent during 1776-2006, which translates into more than 780,000 additional inhabitants, mostly through a massive enlargement and densification of the informal outskirts.

It is noteworthy that official figures measuring urban population continue to drop, down to 42.6 percent from 44 percent in 1786. From the official perspective, Egypt has been becoming less and less urbanized for the last 20 years.

The administrative definition of an urban region, which has remained fixed with the exception of several reclassifications in the region of Greater Cairo, has acquired the status of artifact. It does not account for the dynamic urbanization of areas that, like the villages of Greater Cairo, are outside of the traditional city limits.

More detailed data is needed to determine the extent of this urbanization from below. In 1776, the rate of urbanization in Egypt (defined as the part of the population living in the 800 agglomerations greater than 10,000 inhabitants) was calculated at 70 percent.⁵ Today, that figure is around 80 percent. Most of those neo-urbanites, no longer engaged in agriculture, have to earn their living and make their settlements habitable by themselves-without services from the state and, indeed, without its recognition.

Endnotes

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