

RARE PROTESTS IN EGYPT LEAD TO CLASHES AND ARRESTS



Almost 500 people have been detained in Egypt in the past few days after protests against alleged government corruption, human rights activists say. Demonstrations were reported in Cairo, Alexandria and several other cities on Friday night [20 September], and in the port city of Suez on Saturday evening. The authorities have not yet released an official number of arrests. Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, there has been a wide-ranging crackdown on dissent, and protests are very rare. **(BBC News)**

Why are these protests happening now?

According to analysts, there has been an undercurrent of anger and dissatisfaction simmering under the surface of Egyptian society for a while, related to both issues of democracy (and what is seen to be undemocratic acts by the president) and issues of economy (and rising costs of living). Official state figures released in July reported that about one-third (32.5%) of Egyptians were living in poverty (on less than \$1.40 a day), which was an increase from 27.8% in 2015. According to the World Bank, "some 60 percent of Egypt's population is either poor or vulnerable".

In this political and social climate, the spark was a series of online videos by Mohamed Ali, an Egyptian former building contractor who has exiled himself to Spain. In the videos, which Ali has been posting since the beginning of September, he accused the president and others in leadership of corruption, and excessive spending of state funds on luxury hotels and residences.

Who is Mohamed Ali?

Joana Saba, writing for *BBC News*, describes the 45-year-old businessman (and part-time actor) as having become a "household name" in Egypt in recent weeks, due to his background that seems to support his vocal criticism of the president and the government. Ali reportedly owned a contracting business and worked on a few military projects, giving him what he said was 'insider information' about the Egyptian military's state fund spending and prompting some to hail him as a 'whistleblower'.

Initially, his videos sparked a series of hashtags on social media, but the accusations were enough to push some Egyptians out onto the streets this past weekend, despite the risks associated with protesting (public gatherings of more than 10 people without government approval have been banned since 2013 – *BBC News*). According to Saba, "in spite of the economic pressures, the prospect of protests [had] remained unlikely, due to widespread protest fatigue and harsh repercussions for any displays of opposition." These recent protests therefore came as a surprise to many.

Government response

Mr Sisi has acknowledged the construction of the luxury residences and said that he would continue to do so as it benefits Egypt, but he has publicly denounced Ali's accusations of corruption as "lies" and "slander".

In response to the protests in Suez on Saturday (21 September), tear gas and live rounds were fired by security forces who were attempting to disperse the crowds. And according to human rights groups, there have been hundreds of arrests. Since coming to power in 2014 (after leading the military ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi in 2013), Mr Sisi "has overseen a broad crackdown on dissent, including the jailing of thousands of dissidents and the effective banning of protests" (*Aljazeera*).

From a Western perspective, Mr Sisi has been seen as a stabilising force in Egypt after the tumult of the Arab Spring revolution of 2011 and the subsequent ousting of Morsi, and Egypt is seen as an important stabilising force in the region. Mr Sisi therefore has significant support from Western leaders, which was reiterated by US president Donald Trump during a meeting on Monday 23 September on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Mr Sisi has also been supported by many Christians in Egypt, who had faced a severe uptick in persecution under the Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Sisi has, on multiple occasions, acknowledged the Egyptian Church as an important part of Egyptian society, despite constituting only 10% of the population.

Egyptian Christians do, however, still acknowledge that corruption is an issue in Egypt that needs to be addressed. According to two different Christian leaders in Egypt, these recent protests are significant because they have broken through a “barrier of fear”, and it is the first time in recent years that people have been willing to stand up and speak against corruption. Now, they say, there are two possible responses of those in power: the government could see that people are not afraid and could move to correct issues of corruption, or those in power could choose to clamp down even further. The initial response in recent days points to the second option, but Egyptians are waiting expectantly to see what might happen in the coming days and weeks.

PRAY

- For Egyptian leaders to truly work for the good of the country
- For those who are suffering financially to come to know God as their Father who knows their needs
- For the Egyptian Church to demonstrate love for all – the government, the protestors, the needy and the aggressors

IMAGE SOURCE

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/22/world/middleeast/egypts-protests-sisi-mohamed-ali.html>