

LOW-COST AUTHORITARIANISM: THE EGYPTIAN REGIME AND LABOR MOVEMENT SINCE 2013

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Authoritarianism under military auspices has been reimposed in Egypt since mid-2013. The state has outlawed protests, strikes, and sit-ins in the public sphere and has subjected public spaces and private media to tight surveillance. It also has mounted repression of the independent labor movement. When taken together, these factors suggest that the labor movement is likely to wane in the near future. Whether this will last over the long term remains uncertain.

An Independent Labor Movement Losing Ground

- Between 2004 and 2013, Egypt witnessed a wave of labor strikes and protest unlike anything seen since the late 1940s, peaking in the January 2011 revolution.
- After the revolution, the state offered no concessions in laws and institutional arrangements regarding freedom of association, the right to strike, or a minimum wage—which had been demands of labor activists and independent unionists.
- Since June 2013, the state has stepped up its repression of labor protest and strikes.
- The rising repression has gone hand in hand with calls for national unity against terrorism and in support of the current regime. Social protest and labor strikes are viewed as treasonous.
- The regime is adamant about reimposing the structures of the old Nasserist state. It seeks to bring together trade unions under a state-dominated federation of unions, while placing extraordinary restrictions on industrial action.
- At the same time, the state wants to liberalize the economy at the expense of workers, which would mean upholding political Nasserism but ignoring economic Nasserism.

The Future of Egypt's Labor Movement

- The current situation is unsustainable in the long term. The drivers of the January revolution remain entrenched. Workers are still economically and politically marginalized. Real incomes are declining and previous gains are threatened with future privatizing of state-owned enterprises, downsizing of the government bureaucracy, and increasing informal labor in the private sector.
- The future of the labor and trade union movement is not clear. In the short term, the movement is weakened and likely to wane.
- There is no doubt that workers have gained a significant amount of experience in the past decade, and that the instruments of repression cannot erase that experience from their memory. This could someday form the basis for trade unions that truly represent Egypt's workers.

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