

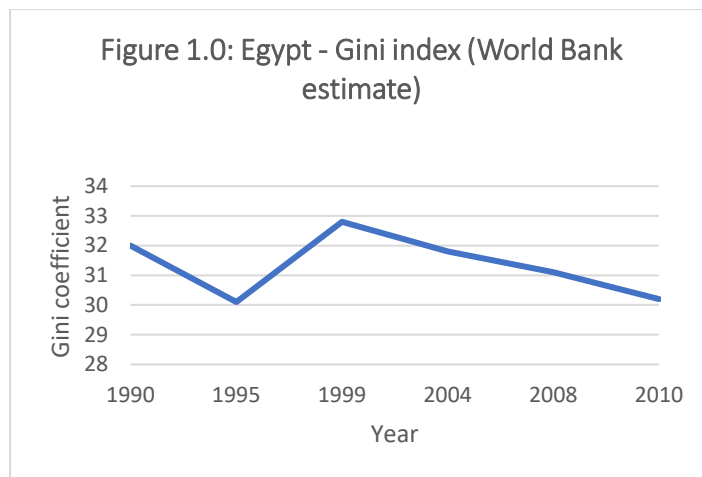
Select a recent protest. Explain what role inequality played in it.

Introduction

In 2011, millions of protestors gathered in Egypt's Tahrir Square, demanding "bread, freedom, and social justice" from their government (Reardon, 2012). While the protestors' slogan clearly calls for social justice, debate continues about the role inequality played. Mainstream Western analysis, often driven by neoliberal institutions like the World Bank, tends to focus on civilisational struggles, detaching the protests from their socioeconomic roots (Alvaredo and Piketty, 2014). While the role of horizontal inequalities, such as gender and religious disparities, is widely acknowledged, the role of vertical inequalities remains contested. This essay challenges the mainstream approach by arguing that vertical inequalities—the unequal distribution of resources within a society regardless of identity-based differences (MacNaughton, 2017)—mobilised protestors, determined the nature of their contribution, and fostered solidarity by shaping the protestor identity in Tahrir. To demonstrate this, the paper will first explore the pre-protest landscape of inequality in Egypt, then apply grievance theory and examine the influence of Arab Socialism on lower-income groups' grievances. Subsequently, it will analyse the role of educated middle-class youth using grievance and resource theories. Finally, the paper will situate the Egyptian protests within a global context to emphasise the significance of vertical inequality in fostering solidarity and creating a protestor identity.

Beyond the Surface: Inequality as the Core of People's Grievances

The following section aims to determine the extent of economic inequality affecting Egypt in the years leading up to the protest to determine the role it played.



Source: World Bank (2019)

The dominant Western perspective on the Arab Spring often disregards high inequality as a reason for the 2011 Egyptian protests. This is because International Financial Institutions like the World Bank, which provide data commonly used in the West, report low levels of inequality during that time. Figure 1.0 shows that Egypt's Gini coefficients were relatively low compared to other countries, reaching 30.2 the year before the protests. Consequently, World Bank economists (Hlasny and Verme, 2013; Verme et al., 2014) have argued that the protests were driven by a deteriorating middle class seeking greater economic freedoms, reflecting neoliberal free market concerns (Verme et al., 2014; Achcar, 2020).

However, this mainstream view has been criticised for relying solely on the Gini index to understand Egypt's inequality (Achcar, 2020; Alvaredo and Piketty, 2014). The Gini index, based on income, does not accurately reflect inequality in a country prone to mismeasurement of top incomes due to its reliance on household surveys (Achcar, 2020; Abdel Ghafar, 2021; Alvaredo and Piketty, 2014).

Alternative data suggests Egypt experienced significant economic inequality, characterised by a vast wealth divide between its affluent and deprived citizens exacerbated by corruption in the growing private sector. In the year before the protests, the wealthiest 10% in Egypt held 62.8% of the nation's total wealth while earning only 27.7% of the income (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2010). This wealth divide contributed to other vertical inequalities, such as access to high-quality private schooling, which was determined by income and wealth disparities. As a result, private education, costing 5,000 to 10,000 EGP annually, was accessible only to the upper and middle classes (Abdel Ghafar, 2021). These interconnected vertical inequalities likely fuelled economic grievances among the working class during the uprisings, aligning with grievance theory, which posits that perceived injustice or grievances, especially in response to inequality, drive protest participation (Solt, 2015). This theory is often used to explain lower-income groups' involvement in protests.

Grievance Theory in Action

Applying grievance theory to the events leading up to and during the protests reveals that working-class protesters were motivated by a sense of injustice and unequal treatment. By 2010, businessmen held 35% of parliamentary seats in Egypt (Soliman, 2012). The 2004 Government of Egypt, known as the Nazif Government, started and exemplified this trend with its 'businessman cabinet', which included six monopoly capitalists who pushed for Neoliberal policies and increased privatisation (Soliman, 2012; Dunne and Revkin, 2011). It was, therefore, significant when President Mubarak's initial attempt to suppress the unrest involved dismissing many Nazif ministers and increasing salaries within the public sector to mitigate the increased inequality caused by the cabinet's privatisation and corruption (Dunne and Revkin, 2011; Lynch, 2011). It was significant as the President's failed attempt illustrated the ousted government's understanding of existing inequalities' role in causing the public's grievances and mobilising political participation. This role was made apparent when the residence of Ahmed Ezz, a multibillionaire steel tycoon and National Democratic Party member, was burned by protestors in a symbolic act of rejecting the corruption and privatisation which facilitated the unjust concentration of wealth in the hands of a few while making the Egyptian working class worse off (Al Naggar, 2011). This act signified the fact that inequality related grievances were at the heart of the protests.

The Role of Arab Socialism

It is important to note that the World Bank's reports on the uprisings do not entirely rule out inequality as a cause of the protests (Verme et al., 2014); the IFI accepts that the wide discontent may have been partially caused by a 'mismatch' between facts and perceptions regarding economic equality among Egyptians, proposing that such aversions were caused by political and ideological factors such as a low 'taste for democracy' and high levels of 'religious practice' (Verme et al., 2014, Hlasny and Verme, 2016). The mainstream understanding, therefore, correctly identifies the existence of a political and ideological dimension to the perceptions of inequality prior to the uprisings. As Sen (2000) notes, people's perceptions of inequality are often influenced by both the objective degree of inequality and their social justice norms. However, the IFI's understanding of the political dimension of people's economic grievances has been condemned for reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes and ignoring the state's historical context (Alvaredo and Piketty, 2014).

This paper recognises that the existence of wealth inequalities does not entail the non-existence of a 'mismatch' between facts and perceptions. It seems implausible to claim that protestors were accurately informed on the objective degree of inequality in Egypt when there is still debate over

this topic. However, such perceptions need not necessarily be seen as the result of religious practices or a lack of democracy or any other Orientalist understanding of the Middle East. This paper argues that the primary social justice norm affecting people's perceptions of inequality in Egypt was a history of Arab socialism. Blending elements of socialism and Arab nationalism, this political ideology emphasises economic state intervention, social justice, and equality (Achcar, 2020). Prior to the trend of advancing a free-market agenda discussed above, Egypt's developmental-state model included social protection measures such as free education and guaranteed public sector jobs for graduates, mitigating existing wealth divides between the working, middle and upper classes (Achcar, 2020). The state's implementation of a neoliberal programme in the 1970s and the increased inequalities which this resulted in therefore operated against a backdrop of a pre-existing ideology of Arab Socialism, which promoted the idea of egalitarianism and social justice as central values (Lübker, 2004). Consequently, the discrepancy between the values of Arab socialism and the reality of inequality in Egypt created an increased sense of injustice and enhanced inequality-related grievances among those who had ascribed to the ideology, further mobilising them to act. This example demonstrates how social justice norms can influence perceptions of inequality and inspire collective action while also emphasising the crucial role of existing objective inequalities in shaping these perceptions.

The Educated, Middle-Class Youth

As the protests involved a wide cross-section of Egyptian society, including individuals from different social classes, age groups, and genders, it is challenging to pinpoint a single majority demographic or social class among the protestors. Despite this challenge, the protests are commonly seen as being led by Egypt's educated, middle-class youth (Verme et al., 2014; Reardon, 2012). Even the harshest of the World Bank's critics have not disputed the group's role in organising and leading the protests. While it may be plausible to reuse the above argument developed for the participation of low-income groups, different classes can be understood to have distinct grievances related to inequality (Pellicer et al., 2012). For this reason, this section aims to develop a more nuanced approach that considers what other theories offer before applying them to the Egyptian protests. As made apparent by the shortcomings of using Egypt's Gini coefficient to determine the extent of its inequality, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to understanding the relationship between protests and inequality.

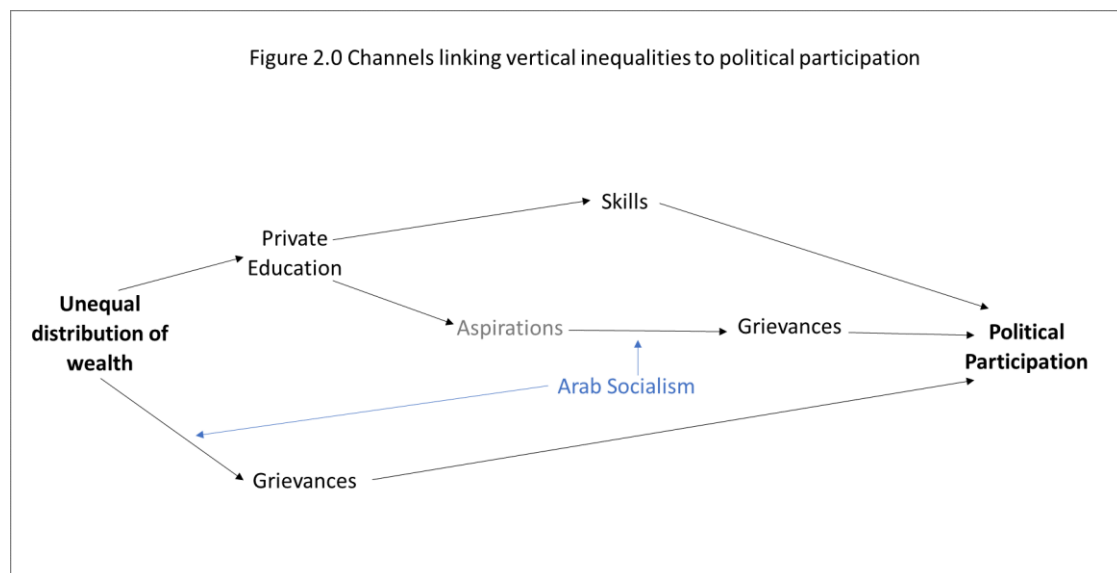
Understanding their Grievances

First, it is helpful to outline the specific grievances driving this group's political participation. Simply attributing the group's grievances to the deterioration of their class obscures the bigger picture and the increasing inequalities the group faced. Before the revolution, there were approximately 2.5 million unemployed individuals in Egypt, with approximately half aged 20 to 24 (Korotayev and Zinkia, 2011). Over 43% of the unemployed had obtained university degrees just before the protests, meaning that many of the unemployed were more educated than previous generations and looking for jobs in the white-collar and public sectors (a consequence of Arab socialism), which were in shorter supply since the adoption of a neoliberal regime (Singerman, 2013), indicating declining levels of intergenerational mobility and increasing intergenerational inequalities. This is supported by the International Labour Office's (ILO) finding that just 19% of Egyptian men aged between eighteen and forty-nine with prior experience had been able to secure "good" jobs (Sagerman, 2013). It is important to stress that the ILO's findings do not merely point to rising unemployment but also declining social mobility levels despite decreasing income inequality. This decline can be explained by increased privatisation, which, coupled with corruption within the private sector, led to the concentration of opportunities within the hands of a few, further perpetuating existing vertical inequalities (Korotayev and Zinkia, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Therefore, declining levels of social mobility can be seen to have fuelled perceptions of rising inequality of opportunity among the group, leading to increased participation by the educated middle-class youth.

Understanding their Role

Second, it is essential to understand why this group's contribution is undisputed. While protests are often thought of as a means for marginalised groups to demand change, resource theory posits that they require a significant investment of time and money, making them more feasible for people with higher incomes (Solt, 2015; Pellicer et al., 2012). This is because the groups who would be most advantaged by political actions aimed at improving their circumstances are impeded by the very conditions that prevent them from influencing political results. One key feature of resource theory is its emphasis on the capacity of individuals to voice their grievances. This paper suggests that in the educated, middle-class youth's case, this capacity was not necessarily exercised through the provision of financial resources; what the group brought to the table was their expertise. In their analysis of the protests, Pellicer et al. (2012) highlight how education enabled the Egyptian middle-class youth to articulate their political grievances through political means by equipping them with the necessary skills. Attaining a private education is seen to have equipped individuals with the tools to comprehend political challenges more deeply, cultivate a sense of self-efficacy, and connect with social circles that promote political involvement and information exchange (Pellicer et al., 2012). For

example, the group's computer literacy (attained through a private education) and access to technologies (attained through their relative wealth) can explain their effective use of social media platforms to efficiently organise protests and raise awareness on a range of issues ranging from economic inequality to police brutality which led to the protests' being dubbed as the "Facebook Revolution" (Reardon, 2012). In this sense, vertical inequalities such as disparities in wealth and education can be seen to have not only mobilised different groups but also determined the different roles people took on in the protests by shaping how they contributed. This has led Pellicer et al. (2012) to suggest that resource theory is more helpful in explaining the role of inequality in the context of the Egyptian protests; this essay likewise suggests resource theory plays an important role in understanding middle-class participation. Drawing on their model, figure 2.0 summarises the findings of this paper to present the channels linking vertical inequalities to political participation diagrammatically.



Solidarity Beyond Borders: A Global Protestor Identity

This essay argues that the significance of inequality in the Egyptian protests extends beyond the protests themselves and contributes to the emergence of a global protestor identity. The protests in Egypt served as a catalyst for a global wave of demonstrations that challenged inequality, with the absence of orientalist stereotypes enabling a more widely accepted recognition of the role played by inequality in these movements (Shenker and Gabbatt, 2011). For example, the burning of Ahmed Ezz's residence became a symbolic act of resistance against extreme vertical inequalities, inspiring

similar symbolism in other movements such as Occupy Wall Street's "We are the 99%" (Andersen, 2011).

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has been widely perceived as a movement that sought to challenge economic and social inequality, as well as the corrupt practices of neoliberal financial systems (Quinn, 2016), indicating the similar role of inequality in this movement and the one posited by this paper in the Egyptian protests. The connection between the Egyptian protests and other contemporary protests is not merely symbolic. Activist group 'Adbusters', credited with initiating OWS, claimed to have been inspired by the Egyptian protests (Shenker and Gabbatt, 2011), having used the phrase "America needs its own Tahrir" in emails rallying support for their movement while supporting the Egyptian fight against inequality (Andersen, 2011).

The global recognition of inequality's role in the Egyptian protests among activists and protestors does not merely challenge the mainstream view (as this essay has aimed to do) but also signals the emergence of a contemporary protestor identity rooted in the global structure of inequality. This new identity transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, fostering solidarity among protestors across borders who are united in their opposition to inequality while, perhaps more importantly, operating within state borders too. Building on this, this paper argues that inequality helped shape the Egyptian protestor's identity in Tahrir, not just their grievances or capacity to contribute. This identity created a sense of belonging and purpose as individuals rallied together to confront the different inequalities they faced. Therefore, this paper argues that this shared identity accounts for the high degree of solidarity that was evident among diverse groups in Tahrir Square despite their distinct grievances related to inequality outlined above (Reardon, 2012). This is significant as it has been widely argued that the protestors' united front played a prominent role in ensuring the protests' success (Reardon, 2012; Shenker and Gabbatt, 2011). Therefore, the notion of a 'protestor identity' as used in this paper implies a shared sense of belonging and purpose among protesters who oppose inequality which built solidarity among different groups of Egyptian protestors as it did between Egyptian and global protestors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Egyptian protests were driven by various factors, with inequality playing a crucial and multifaceted role in mobilising protestors, determining how they contributed and building solidarity among different groups with distinct grievances. Contrary to the mainstream Western

understanding of the protests, which excludes high inequality as a potential cause, evidence suggests that vertical inequalities stemming from the state's significant wealth divide were a significant factor in driving popular grievances. The study has shown that grievance theory offers a valuable framework for understanding working-class protestors' participation in the protests, with perceptions of inequality being heightened by the values of Arab Socialism. The educated middle-class youth played a critical role in the protests, utilising skills attained from their private education to voice their grievances effectively. Resource theory, therefore, helps to understand why this group's contribution level was significant, especially regarding their effective use of social media platforms. Finally, the role of inequality in the protests can be seen to have shaped a local and global protestor identity, strengthening solidarity between different groups despite their distinct grievances, and consequently reinforcing the protests.

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