

A dream deferred

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For Egyptian youth who took to the streets in 2011, Alaa Abd El Fattah was an icon of the revolution. Police arrested the blogger and activist, then just 23 years old, for protesting under former autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

Since then three governing authorities have risen to power and Mr Abd El Fattah has been imprisoned by each. When police under the newly installed military-backed regime threw him in jail again last November, accusing him of organising an unsanctioned political protest, it was a sign for the revolution's youth of just how little had changed.

"Everyone knows that most of those in jail are young and that oppression is targeting an entire generation to subjugate it to a regime that understands how separate it is from them and that does not want to and cannot, in any case, accommodate or include them," wrote Mr Abd El Fattah in a letter from prison in March.

He is one of more than 16,000 dissidents, many of them Egyptian youth under the age of 30, languishing behind bars, a widely-used figure attributed to anonymous government officials.

In a country where youth spearheaded a revolt that ended more than three decades of Mr Mubarak's dictatorial rule, a largely ageing elite still controls the government. Before May's presidential elections the youngest member of the interim cabinet, Khaled Abdel Aziz, Egypt's youth minister, was 55 years old. Ibrahim Mahlab, the interim prime minister and a holdover from the Mubarak era, was 67 years old, while former defence minister and army chief, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, the country's newly elected president, is 59.

Both Mr Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi, the country's ousted Islamist president, failed to reach out to youth. Many signs now suggest that the new military-backed government is committing the same mistake of alienating the largest segment of the country's population and risking a similar fate.

"We are not involved in the political process," said Mohamed Soliman, a 23-year old leader of al-Midan Student Group, part of the al-Dostour political party founded by Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei. "We should be involved in parliament, in elections, in the campaigns. The youth are disappointed. They feel like they don't belong to society, like they aren't being included in anything. We have a lot of friends in jail; it's disturbing."

Repressive government measures that limit avenues for expressing dissent have embittered many youth. Since Mr Morsi's ouster on July 3rd 2013, university campuses throughout Egypt have been the scene of near daily protests by largely pro-Muslim Brotherhood students against the military-backed government. The protests have often turned into clashes with security forces and have

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disrupted classes and exams. University officials have authorised police to enter campuses and arrest students. At least 177 students have been killed, according to Students Against the Coup, a youth activist coalition.

A controversial protest law was passed last November banning any gathering of more than ten people without prior government permission. Most of those arrested under the law have been young people. They have included prominent secular leaders such as Ahmed Maher and Mohamed Adel, the founding members of the April 6 Youth Movement, a group that helped drive the January 25th 2011 revolution. A judge sentenced the two, along with Ahmed Douma, another prominent activist, to three years with hard labour for violating the protest law.

“We have the future ahead of us and we want something better: democracy, freedoms, human rights, a better life. The older generation has the future behind them, so they just want stability,” said Ahmad Abdallah, a leader of the April 6th youth movement. In April a court ruling banned the group’s activities and ordered the closure of its headquarters.

Egypt’s young people are disappointed in the lack of change, Mr Abdallah added. If their demands continue to be ignored, there will be no political involvement from the younger generations.

Already signs are appearing that many young people share Mr Abdallah’s disenchantment with the political process. In January 38% of the electorate turned out to vote in a referendum on a new constitution that was approved by more than 98%, according to Egypt’s electoral commission. While the government lauded it a success, according to multiple unofficial monitors, the small turnout was composed overwhelmingly of older voters.

Mr Sisi, who was responsible for ousting Egypt’s last president, won 96.9% in May’s presidential election. But only 47% of eligible voters cast their ballots.

“I didn’t vote in the constitutional referendum,” Mr Soliman said. “I felt like it didn’t make sense, that it wouldn’t make a difference. Young people are giving up. If youth are not involved, there will be anger, more demonstrations, another uprising.”

While youth apathy towards the political process grows, the military-backed leaders have done little in response. In an apparent attempt to reach out to youth, Adly Mansour, the former interim president, called a series of meetings with youth leaders, including one directly following the referendum vote. In his speech on January 9th to enact the constitution, he called out to Egypt’s youth population.

“You were the fuel of the January 25th and June 30th revolutions [the first day of mass protests that led to the military coup which overthrew Mr Morsi began]> and are embarking on the stage of building and empowerment,” Mr Mansour said. “Build your future, be engaged in politics and parties, and be confident that you will reap the benefits of what you sow.”

But these few words accompanied by little action rang hollow and have not satisfied young people. Several prominent youth groups started boycotting Mr Mansour’s meetings when they began to feel they were nothing but a media show.

Governments in the region have long tried to use youth as window dressing, said Ghada Baroum, a youth expert and a professor at the American University of Cairo. They allude to their importance in speeches or sometimes appoint privileged young individuals to government positions. But true youth participation must start at the grassroots, she said.

“Elite youth who come from well-connected families will show some presence [in politics]>, but you don’t see an actual participation of youth,” Ms Baroum said. “You have to realise that this starts at the school [and]> at the community level in order to see actual participation of youth. It doesn’t start at the top.”

Since 1976 Egypt’s population has more than doubled, reaching an estimated 80m, according to the United Nations Population Fund. More than half the population are under 25 and the country’s youth

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unemployment rates remain among the highest in the world. Those younger than 30 make up 70.8% of the jobless, according to a report released last November by the country's national statistics agency.

Although reforming education is seen as essential in improving employability, very little has been accomplished. The few young people who are employed complain that their wages are low, with few benefits and with little opportunity for advancement. In a 2011 joint survey by the Population Council, a New York-based research group, and the Egyptian cabinet's official think-tank, only 14.8% of young workers were revealed to have social insurance benefits.

Many fear that the high numbers of unemployed, marginalised and disgruntled youth could turn to violence. The ferocious clashes between police and hardcore soccer fans, Ultras Ahlawy, who played a key role in the 2011 revolution, have continued under the new leadership. The harsh crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood protests has fuelled jihadism and led some Islamist youth to form violent groups that have claimed terrorist attacks.

Having now taken on the presidency, Mr Sisi will be forced to deal with the problems afflicting Egypt's growing youth population. The former field marshal has indicated that he will continue to deal with dissent with a heavy hand. This risks marginalising the youth population even further. Discontent, anger and frustration will only swell; and the threat of another mass uprising will become real.

* This article was previously published by [Africa in Fact](#) [2]

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Article-Summary:

The post-revolution governments in Egypt have done little to appease a disgruntled, restless and marginalised youth. The youth spearheaded the revolt that toppled the Mubarak dictatorship, but a largely ageing elite is still at the helm.

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