

# Egypt, and the World's Revolt

**Paul Rogers**

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**How do Egypt's latest huge street protests relate to popular eruptions elsewhere in the world? A war, involving Egypt and Syria in 1973, supplies part of the answer.**

Are the extraordinary mass demonstrations in Egypt particular to that country or are they a part of a much wider pattern, connecting with events in Turkey and Brazil? Do they link also to public outrage in Greece, the indignados in Spain, the Occupy movement in the United States and the large student protests in Chile in 2012?

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Several columns in this series have highlighted the phenomenon of “revolts from the margins”, not least as exemplified by the Naxalite neo-Maoist [rebellion \[11\]](#) in India. Their argument is that a failure of the current global economic system to deliver economic justice, combined with the widespread marginalisation of knowledgeable people, has led to deep frustrations that can break out into great popular opposition (see, for example, ["China and India: heartlands of global protest \[12\]" \[8 August 2008\]](#); ["A world in revolt \[13\]" \[12 February 2009\]](#); ["A world on the margin \[14\]" \[21 May 2010\]](#); ["The global crisis: between Cairo and Davos \[15\]" \[3 February 2011\]](#); ["Al-Qaida, and a world in balance \[16\]" \[6 June 2011\]](#); ["The thinning world: Mali, Nigeria, India \[17\]" \[12 July 2012\]](#); and ["A decade's war: legacy and lesson \[18\]" \[4 April 2013\]](#)).

Whether or not the Egyptian protests are related to this phenomenon, one of the most remarkable issues is the way that much of the very source of these “revolts from the margins” can be traced to a war instigated mainly by Egypt almost exactly forty years ago.

## The Egyptian Context

The Yom Kippur/Ramadan [war \[19\]](#) in October 1973 - so called because it coincided with these respective religious holidays - was characterised by Egypt's determined efforts (and those of [Syria \[20\]](#)) to regain territory lost in the [six-day war \[21\]](#) of June 1967. The initial Egyptian assault across the Suez canal and through Israel's Bar Lev defensive line was successful, but within a few days the Israelis had regrouped. Israel was aided by a huge air-bridge of military supplies established by the United States, which was one of the factors prompting the Arab members of [Opec \[22\]](#) to use the price of oil as a weapon against Israel's western allies.

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The political impact of the decision was modest, but the economic [outcome](#) [23] was huge: oil prices rose almost overnight by more than 70%, and there were further big increases in the months that followed. By May 1974, just seven months later, oil prices were over 400% higher. Soon, economic stagnation combined with inflation, to critical effect across the world.

The sudden shock might in principle have led to a serious questioning of the western economic model - especially as [The Limits to Growth](#) [24] had just been published, with its cogent argument that a transit to [sustainable](#)[25] economies was needed. Instead, the economic crises of the later 1970s generated an ideological move in another direction: towards the neo-liberal free-market model espoused by the [influential](#) [26] Chicago economic school. Their corollary in the political arena was the "Reaganomics" and "Thatcherism" of the early 1980s, which in turn were supplemented by the international financial institutions' "Washington consensus" and the City of London's [deregulation](#) [27] (the "big bang") in 1986.

The rise of neo-liberalism was given another huge boost by the [collapse](#) [28] of the Soviet Union and its bloc in 1990-91, followed by Russia's troubled [embrace](#) [29] of "turbo-capitalism". Across much of the world, a new policy mix - wholesale privatisation, free trade and financial deregulation took centre-stage. The mantra of the [era's](#) [30] economic ideologues said it all - "there is no alternative".

## The Common Factors

Where do events in Egypt, which late on 3 July 2013 led to the army's ousting of the [president](#) [31], fit into this pattern? An important aspect is that behind the spectacle of millions of people on the streets is an [entrenched](#)[32] elite

stratum with many senior [military](#) [33] personnel at its core. For the moment, Egypt's military may retain much popular support in the face of Mohammed Morsi's failures; yet it is also relevant that, in the context of a weak Egyptian economy whose problems were accentuated by the transnational financial crisis since 2008, the government now overthrown had [faced](#) [34] almost impossible expectations.

But if Egypt's predicament has few if any direct connections with that of [Turkey](#) [35], [Brazil](#) [36] and the other places where unpredictable populist movements have arisen, there are two binding features. The first is that the Arab awakening in Egypt (as [elsewhere](#) [37] in the middle east) has been motivated not just by opposition to autocracy and repression but by a revolt against systems [experienced](#) [38] as deeply unjust in economic terms, in that they consign millions of educated and aware young people to lives with few if any prospects.

In that respect, [events](#) [39] in Egypt do connect with the wider failure of the world economy to deliver emancipation and economic justice. The twist in this story is that this world economic system, in its [currently](#) [40] unregulated and disastrous form, arose directly out of events set in motion by Egypt and Syria forty years ago.

The second feature is the sheer unpredictability of mass [protest](#) [41], a matter of great [concern](#) [42] to political elites and their security cohorts across the world. That really is deeply worrying for them, and something that will cause them to double their efforts to track what is happening and predict its evolution - an effort no doubt aided by the use of [Prism](#) [43] and the other forms of mass surveillance. What, though, if even those systems don't have a proper handle

on what is happening? That will give political elites sleepless nights in the weeks and months to come.

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**Photo:** Tahrir Square Cairo 3 July 2013. **Source:** Farkous.

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