

Protests shake Egypt after cut to bread subsidies

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Hundreds of Egyptians in a number of cities, including Alexandria, Minya, Desouk and the working class Imbaba district of Cairo turned out on Tuesday to protest severe cuts to bread subsidies.

Videos posted on social media show hundreds of demonstrators in Alexandria chanting, “We want to eat! We want bread!” Protesters temporarily blocked railways in Alexandria and between Cairo and Minya as part of the demonstrations which were labeled on social media as the Intifada of Supplies.

Minister of Supplies Ali Mosehly announced on Monday that the number of subsidized loaves of bread each ration card holder is allowed to buy per day would be slashed by two-fifths, from five to three. Mosehly, who took over the post following a cabinet shakeup last month after a severe sugar shortage, had complained that, at \$28 million a month, the bread subsidy program was too costly.

Following Monday’s announcement, bakeries began refusing paper subsidy cards, instead insisting that they would only provide bread to those with plastic SMART cards which are difficult for the poor to obtain. Additionally, the number of subsidized loaves available at each location was slashed from 1,500 to just 500 a day.

“Most of the families in poor areas have paper cards. We have been trying for years to get the electronic card, but you have to bribe the employees to follow up,” protester Montaser Awad told Middle East Eye.

Saed, an employee at the Monera al Gharbya government supplies office, explained to Middle East Eye that distributors had been ordered by the government to stop selling bread to those with paper cards: “These types of cards are called the golden cards, which include the paper cards and the poor who don’t have any cards.

“The reason why the government is doing this is because they saw that the amount of bread consumed by these golden cards are huge. They decided to cut it.”

Saed also expressed his sympathies for those protesting, “There were about a hundred, men and women. I cannot blame them. But we are just servants at the government. We face the same problems at our houses.”

Egypt’s bread subsidy program feeds tens of millions of the country’s poor and working class. The amount of wheat required to maintain the program has made Egypt the world’s largest importer of wheat products.

The protests came just five days after former dictator Hosni Mubarak was acquitted of any responsibility for the murder of the hundreds of protesters that his security forces gunned down in the street as he fruitlessly sought to hold on to power during the 2011 revolution. The ruling by the country’s top appeals court last week cleared Mubarak for release from detention at the Maadi Military Hospital where he has been held for the last six years.

Mubarak had been sentenced to life in prison for the killings in 2012, but an appeals court overturned the ruling and ordered a retrial where Mubarak was subsequently acquitted. That ruling handed down in 2014 was upheld on Tuesday.

Three-year prison terms for Mubarak and his two sons Alaa and Gamal over corruption charges were upheld in January of 2016. With time served, Alaa and Gamal walked out of prison in 2015. With the upholding of Mubarak’s acquittal, no one from the brutal military regime remains behind bars.

Egyptian society is a ticking time bomb six years after the revolution which brought down the Mubarak regime and four years after the military coup which ousted the country’s first democratically elected

president, Muhamed Morsi, and brought to power the current dictator, Abdel Fattah el Sisi.

While protests have been brutally suppressed by the military, and 60,000 of those who rose up in 2011 remain behind bars, the Sisi dictatorship has proven incapable of extinguishing the basic social demands of the revolution: “Bread, freedom and social justice.”

Social pressures are also being exacerbated as Egypt suffers its deepest economic crisis in more than a decade; inflation in January reached nearly 30 percent, five percentage points higher than at the end of 2016.

Prices for essential food items, medicine, transit and housing surged after the Egyptian pound lost half its value after being floated by the government in November. The pressure on working class and poor Egyptians has been further exacerbated by cuts to fuel subsidies and the implementation of a new value added tax.

The Egyptian government has begun enforcing this latest raft of economic shock therapy in order to guarantee the release of \$12 billion in loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), part of an agreement signed in November.

Tuesday’s protests recalled the much larger bread riots which broke out in January 1977 after President Anwar Sadat eliminated subsidies on flour, rice and cooking oil as a condition of receiving loans from the World Bank and IMF, causing food prices to increase by 50 percent. The army stepped in to quell the protests as hundreds of thousands Egyptian workers flooded the streets resulting in 80 deaths, 800 injuries and thousands of people in prison.



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