

# Egyptian Life Over Seven Decades: The Nightmare of Jobs, Education, and Healthcare





The past seventy years since the July 1952 Revolution represent a highly distinctive phase in modern Egyptian history, characterized by leadership drawn from former military officers in a republican system. This invites constant comparison, since each regime often bequeathed the next a legacy of crises and dysfunctions that came to define its operations, with only rare periods of achievements and limited stability.

If we are to compare each era with the next, we must look at the condition of the Egyptian citizen and the attempts at social and economic advancement. The most illuminating angle to do this is through basic constitutional and human needs namely education, healthcare, and employment.

#### Education: From Literacy Campaigns to Masked Illiteracy

The importance of education was diminished when Egypt came under British occupation in 1882, after it had been one of the hallmarks of modernization under Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848). The British prioritized educating civil service employees in English language schools while neglecting mass education.

The colonial administration cut education spending and imposed fees on primary schools, while higher education remained costly and largely the preserve of affluent elites.

Article 19 of the 1923 Constitution stipulated free education in Egypt, but truly

free and universal education was not realized until around 1944. Secondary and technical education were made free by a 1951 decree from the then Minister of Education, Taha Hussein.

This set the stage for the post-1952 expansion of the state education system under the socialist policies of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who inherited a nation with a 75% illiteracy rate.

Nasser's goal in providing free education and employing university graduates in the public sector was to broaden the regime's popular base and prevent social unrest among educated youth.

These policies dramatically expanded educational institutions in Egypt. From just five universities in 1952, there were 12 by the end of 1976, and the number of higher education students more than doubled from 333,300 to 480,000 between 1971 and 1976. However, due to Egypt's high population growth, guaranteed government employment became increasingly unsustainable.

The rapid expansion of higher education eventually resulted in declining quality under President Hosni Mubarak.

After the 1967 war, education spending in the state budget fell even as population densities rose. This marked the beginning of the system's deterioration, which accelerated under Anwar Sadat's *infitah* (openness) policies as education funding shrank in favor of more consumption-oriented budget items.

The state began to adopt a cost-recovery approach, viewing education increasingly as a market commodity.

Economic reform measures launched by Mubarak in 1991 under IMF-backed structural adjustment paved the way for neoliberal policies that continue to this day, reducing funding for essential sectors like education and health.

Teachers' wages stagnated and the figure of the teacher became a symbol of derision depicted in popular television series and films as greedy and reliant on private tutoring to supplement income.

A private education sector emerged to alleviate pressure on the public system. Between 1996 and 2006, the number of private universities in Egypt rose from one to 16. By 2023, this had grown to 27 private universities alongside 28 public ones.

Declining public education quality made private education an alternative, particularly for wealthier families, along with foreign international schools accessible only to the wealthy. These statistics reflect conditions close to and after the 2011 January 25 Revolution.

Historian Joel Benin notes that the defining feature of the Nasser era was that socialism improved the lives of workers in public institutions and the state bureaucracy, providing them with stable jobs and social benefits like healthcare and pensions, along with free education from kindergarten to university and greater opportunities for the children of peasants to access higher education.

A 2016 United Nations Population Situation Report prepared with Egyptian institutions highlighted the erosion of the pro-poor education philosophy that had legitimated the July regime from the start, revealing that 57% of poor Egyptians either never attended school or did not complete primary education, compared to 45% of non-poor citizens.

Private schools became a refuge from overcrowded, low-quality public classrooms, but recent economic pressures have affected families' ability to afford private education. In 2012–2013, households spent 56% on public education and 38% on private schooling.

By 2017–2018, public schooling rose to 68% while private declined to 28%, indicating that many families could no longer bear private school costs and returned their children to public schools.

Salma Hussein's report "Ten Facts About Education Spending in Egypt" explains the state's crisis in education funding and Egypt's declining global indicators.

Though successive Egyptian governments directed about 5% of GDP to school education through 2021, Egypt suffers from significant underfunding. According to the World Bank, Egypt's education budget is no more than one-third of the developing country average.

Current budget data shows the constitutional education spending target is unmet. With Egypt's GDP at 12 trillion Egyptian pounds, education (pre-university and higher) received only about 230 billion pounds in the 2023–2024 budget, representing just 1.72% of GDP — more than 4% below the constitutional requirement of 6% (equivalent to 710 billion pounds).

By 2023, Egypt had about 61,000 schools serving 25.5 million students with 955,000 teachers, but this is still inadequate, and quality remains poor: 70% of 10-year-olds cannot read and comprehend age-appropriate text, according to a World Bank learning poverty report.

Education's limited budget also suffers from misallocation: per-student spending averages about 5,400 Egyptian pounds annually far below the \$11,200 per student in high-income countries.

Hussein's report also highlights regional inequities poor governorates like Assiut, Minya, Sohag, Qena, and Fayoum receive lower per-student spending than

sparsely populated areas like New Valley (15,000 pounds per student vs. 4,000 in Minya).

Education is one of the basic aspects of life hit hardest by the economic crisis. A 2023 report showed a 7.7% rise in education costs; poorer families reduced their educational spending, and female enrollment rates among poor households were far lower than males, reflecting how poverty now disproportionately impedes girls' education. In 2021, the literacy rate in Egypt was 87.18% a decline of 0.5% from the previous year.

Parents now shoulder the education burden previously borne by the state, especially through private tutoring. According to the "Social Justice" platform, private tutoring consumes up to 30% of total household education spending including tuition, transport, uniforms, books, and supplies.

#### Healthcare: The Arrow That Reached the Sky Then Broke

In 1946, Dr. Arthur Cecil published his influential book *One Just Hour on Egypt's health conditions from 1937–1943*. The general picture was one of citizens deprived of minimum healthcare standards. Cecil noted that children often died shortly after weaning from protein deficiency; a mother with seven children might have just two surviving.

Egypt had the world's second-highest infant mortality rate at the time and was plagued by cholera, anemia, schistosomiasis, plague, and tuberculosis.

In the *Area Handbook for Egypt* prepared by the U.S. Decision Support Center for military and civilian personnel, the author notes that healthcare was central to legitimizing Nasser's regime. From 1952, the government strove to improve public health; the 1962 National Charter declared healthcare a fundamental right for every citizen.

Between 1952 and 1976, public per-capita healthcare spending rose by 500%, including the launch of a national health insurance program in 1959 and the expansion of hospitals and rural health units reaching 600 units by 1960.

Thanks to these efforts, average life expectancy improved: from 39 years in 1952 to 59 for women and 60 for men by 1989. The overall mortality rate fell from 24% in 1952 to 10% in 1990, and infant mortality dropped from 193 per 1,000 births to 85 per 1,000 due to widespread immunizations and care programs.

A major 1960s campaign on stagnant water dangers halved schistosomiasis infection rates by 1966. These gains contributed to a population boom from 20 million in 1952 to 67 million in 1991, and about 106 million today.

Sadat's *infitah* policies had limited direct impact on healthcare at first, though spending declined and multinational pharmaceutical companies entered the

Egyptian market. The real shift came after Mubarak's 1991 structural adjustment program, which reduced health spending as a share of GDP and opened the door to private sector expansion.

Several privatization efforts were attempted but stopped by court rulings — including Ahmed Nazif's 2007 decree converting the Health Insurance Organization into a corporation and the 2010 Public-Private Partnership Law.

After the January 25 Revolution, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces approved a state budget that maintained health spending at 4.5% of total expenditure in 2012–2013 (aligned with President Morsi's year in office). Morsi pledged a 1.5% annual increase to reach 10% by the end of his first term a goal never realized.

Egypt's 2014 Constitution set goals to increase education and health spending to about 10% of GDP within three years: 6% for education and 3% for health. A decade later, health remains one of the biggest casualties of economic reforms.

In recent years, Egypt has had one of the world's highest hepatitis C infection rates at 7%. One of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's flagship initiatives was the "100 Million Health" campaign, funded with \$250 million from the World Bank, screening 60 million Egyptians in 2018. Yet systemic healthcare management challenges persist, reflected in low health expenditure as a share of GDP.

Since 2015, health spending has declined sharply through 2020; the COVID-19 pandemic raised it slightly to 1.50% in 2022, but even peak spending around 1.81% in 2015 never met the constitutional minimum.

The health sector continues to slide toward collapse, threatening citizens' right to free treatment. Recent Ministry of Health regulations raised service fees and reduced free care to increase revenues amid currency depreciation.

In the 2023–2024 fiscal year, health spending remains about 1.25% of GDP. The government uses accounting tactics to inflate official numbers, such as including water supply and sanitation under health spending and allocating portions of public debt interest to education and health expenditures, according to the "Don't Believe" platform.

Poor populations bear the greatest burden of cutbacks. Wealthier Egyptians avoid public hospitals, seeking treatment in private facilities and clinics.

Healthcare inflation rose to 17% in 2023, and health costs rank third in low-income household spending at 8.3% of annual expenditures. Overall, Egyptians' out-of-pocket health spending (59.31%) now exceeds government spending.

Private hospitals now comprise 63% of Egypt's healthcare sector between 2012

and 2021, while public hospitals have barely expanded despite a 19% population growth; public hospital beds decreased by 14% even as private beds rose 35%.

Despite these indicators signaling the need to strengthen public health, the government is moving to shrink its role and liberalize the sector actions that may contravene constitutional mandates.

In May 2025, the House of Representatives approved the government's "Hospital Leasing" law to transfer management of state health facilities to private investors, and President Sisi ratified it despite objections from the Medical Syndicate and experts. The law offers no guarantees for continued semi-free care for low-income citizens and could allow some hospitals to exit the health insurance system entirely, undermining access for millions.

The law requires private operators to retain only 25% of existing hospital staff, putting many jobs at risk.

#### Employment: How the Luster of Government Jobs Faded

Nasser's regime sought to provide what he called "family happiness," a term meaning a significant improvement in living standards by combating inflation and advancing broader socioeconomic development. Stable employment was the core means to this end. Nasser's era was the era of the civil servant and state worker.

From 1951, employment policy was selective oriented to fill needs within the state bureaucracy but this did not fully absorb graduates into the workforce based on their academic qualifications.

Under Nasser, hiring university graduates was a pillar of the social order, as described by Mohamed Gad: the system rested on price controls and subsidies, and the provision of jobs to broad segments of the middle class in state institutions.

The state hired all graduates to widen its popular base and secure political loyalty, and wage expenditures did not weigh heavily on the budget. In Nasser's last year in office, wage spending exceeded 15% of total state outlays.

However, this hiring model created bureaucratic bloat and oversaturation, straining state finances. In the mid-1970s, amid inflation and Sadat's infitah policies, his government criticized Nasser-era allowances as a drain on public funds.

Sadat's government enacted Law No. 47 of 1978 to make academic qualifications just one condition among others for job eligibility and to link pay to job roles rather than degrees. Yet hiring continued, albeit with longer lags between graduation and employment three and a half years by 1984, and five

years by 1987.

Under Mubarak, wage spending as a share of total public expenditure rose from 17% to 23.4% between the early years of his presidency and 2000–2001. But persistent inflation throughout the 1980s and 1990s eroded real wages. Gad notes that state employees' purchasing power by the late 1990s was lower than in 1976–1977.

Mubarak also cultivated goodwill through annual wage “bonuses” tied to workers' rallies each Labor Day. Bonuses were cumulative and in 1992 reached 20% aligning with presidential referendums and serving political ends.

Despite periodic increases, wage growth failed to keep pace with inflation. By 2011, the minimum wage was 710 Egyptian pounds, while workers were demanding 1,200 pounds as a basic floor.

Under President Sisi, civil servants came to be seen as economic burdens. In 2017, the Planning Ministry announced a strategy to reduce public employment to one government employee per 40 citizens by 2030, down from one per 13.

Though the 2011 revolution briefly boosted public employment adding one million government jobs in 2011–2012 the Sisi government cut a similar number from 2015–2017.

Under austerity measures, wage spending in the 2017–2018 budget fell below 6% of GDP the fourth consecutive annual decline since Sisi took office.

By 2022, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics reported about 3,231,000 government employees, representing roughly 20% of Egypt's labor force.

The government raised the minimum wage multiple times, reaching 6,000 Egyptian pounds (~\$100) in April 2025. But with inflation hitting 35.2% by December 2023, these increases barely offset rising costs of food, fuel, and basic necessities.

In 2020, a four-person household needed 3,218 pounds to cover basic needs when the dollar was 18–19 pounds; by 2024 the U.S. dollar had surged to 48 pounds.

Egyptians once said, “If you miss the government job, roll in its dust” venerating the security, status, and social capital of public employment. But in recent years under harsh austerity, hiring freezes, and wages and pensions that fail to meet basic living costs that adage seems firmly in the past.

This journey through numbers and statistics across 70 years of modern Egyptian history reflects the lived experience of the Egyptian citizen between hopes and

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collapses and echoes what Gilbert Achcar wrote in *The People Want*: sustainable development cannot rely on private capital alone but requires a break from neoliberal models and a restoration of the state and public sector as leaders of development. Policies from the 1950s to the 1970s despite their flaws produced better social outcomes than the neoliberal policies that followed.

What is needed today is a return to developmental policies without the authoritarianism and corruption that also marred those earlier decades.

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