



Egypt's Biggest Worry Is Its Population

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Today, the Egyptian state faces no shortage of strategic threats, ranging from instability emanating from the ongoing crisis next door in Libya to an escalating conflict with nearby Ethiopia over access to the Nile. Yet its biggest long-term challenge is a distinctly domestic one: the quickening pace of its own population.

Earlier this month, Hussein Abdel-Aziz, an advisor to Egypt's official statistics bureau, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), told a call-in show that rising birth rates have put the nation on track for a population explosion of unprecedented proportions over the next decade. Currently, according to Abdel-Aziz, Egypt's population stands at some 102.5 million people, on account of a fertility rate that – at 3.2 births per woman – is among the highest in the region. If that birth rate continues to rise, Abdel-Aziz warned, Egypt's population could increase by more than 20 percent, to 130 million, by the beginning of the 2030s. Yet, he noted, even if it declines appreciably, the Egyptian population is still expected to swell by 20 million souls and reach 123 million by 2032.

These statistics are hardly a surprise. For nearly half-a-decade now, CAPMAS has been warning that the country's population is ballooning. The findings of its 2017 national census confirmed that the Egyptian state is in the throes of a protracted population boom, with the number of citizens basically doubling between 1986 and 2016. That surge has continued, threatening to undermine the country's political and economic stability in the process.

For the government of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, this represents a serious challenge. After some early stumbles, Sisi's administration has managed to make some incremental political and economic gains in recent years. The national unemployment rate has now dipped below eight percent from some 12 percent four years ago, in spite of the economic dislocation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Inflation, too, has declined to manageable levels from its peak of 35 percent in mid-2017; last month, it measured under seven. These domestic advances, coupled with the political marginalization of his main domestic adversary, the Muslim Brotherhood, has left Sisi on firmer footing than ever before.

But that may soon change, thanks to Egypt's surging population. As Abdel-Aziz noted, the country's current population trends mean that Egypt will need to create on the order of a million new jobs every year – something that Sisi and his government are simply not capable of doing. And if they can't, unemployment and poverty will surge, social tensions will intensify, and the country will find itself facing significant internal strife.

It's no wonder birth control has become an overriding policy priority for authorities in Cairo. Back in 2017, Egypt's Health Ministry formally launched "Operation Lifeline," a national plan to bring the country's birthrate down to 2.4 by 2030 through widespread family planning. It sought to do so through, among other things, a nationwide network of clinics and heavily subsidized contraceptives. The plan was subsequently endorsed by the country's influential al-Azhar university, giving it religious sanction.

Supplemental initiatives have followed. Earlier this year, the Dar al-Ifta, a national religious body, officially backed the use of contraceptives, throwing its weight behind the government's priorities. "Islam differentiates between preventing pregnancy and abortion, and it permits the former if there is a fear that a large number of children will not be able to be looked after," it explained in an official statement intended to remove the religious stigma attached to the practice. Sisi, meanwhile, has taken a page out of China's playbook, embracing the notion of a "two child policy" as a way of controlling his country's runaway population.

His reasons for doing so are practical. The more citizens it is forced to care for, the less prosperous the country as a whole will be. Sisi himself has estimated that its projected population surge could end up costing the state as much as a trillion dollars. And if Egypt cannot absorb that cost, it will be forced to pay in other ways, as its swelling population becomes increasingly impoverished, desperate and susceptible to the allure of radical ideologies. All of which makes Egypt's birthrate boom a potential population bomb – and a threat to future stability.