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Covid-19 pandemic in Egypt

The political instrumentalization of the Covid-19 crisis in Egypt

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As of April 24, Egypt is reporting 3,659 coronavirus infections and 276 Covid-19 deaths. However, as this article shows, the government's use of the crisis for its own political purposes casts doubt on the veracity of these figures.[NBN]

While the opposition is accused of instrumentalizing the Covid-19 crisis, the facts point to the military regime itself exploiting the crisis to achieve its own objectives and in order to restore its brand. Here are some examples of how the system uses the crisis or, in some cases, the system even creates a crisis within the crisis so it may then use the resolution of a problem for its own propaganda purposes.

Suspension of teaching

Although the first case of covid-19 dates back to February 14, the decision to suspend schools was made four weeks later, after seven students were confirmed to have the virus. Others called for the suspension of classes earlier out of concern for the students, but they came up against government declarations in the person of the Minister of Education, who emphasized social disparities within schools and refused to close them. He even claimed that schools are "not gathering places!" Thus, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's decision to suspend classes on March 15 only exposed the naivety of the government, and of the Minister.

Aid to Italy

Despite a major shortage of disinfectants, sterilizers, gloves, and masks in Egypt at hospitals, pharmacies and markets, the Egyptian regime sent medical aid by military aircraft to Italy on March 24 and 5 April. Some people have linked this aid to efforts by the Egyptian state to improve its image in Italy, tarnished following the murder of Italian graduate student Giulio Regina, as well as to support the Egyptian and Italian governments' common interests in the Mediterranean.

Two generals die of Covid-19

On March 22 and 23, military press releases announced "the martyrdom of Brigadier General Khaled Shaltout and Brigadier General Shafie Abdelhalim," who were members of the Armed Forces Engineering Authority. It reported that they contracted the Covid-19 virus while participating in disinfection efforts. Yet leaks indicate that they were infected as early as March 11, at a time before there were any disinfection efforts underway, and that the generals were not doing the work themselves.

It was also revealed that they had been infected while carrying out work on the construction of the new administrative capital city. In fact, sources from the Arab Contractors Company revealed on March 19 that all the sites entrusted to that company in the new capital were suspended after the discovery of twenty confirmed cases of contamination among workers at the "Flowers" project site, a site under the supervision of officers from the Seventh Region of the Armed Forces.

100 billion Egyptian pounds to deal with covid-19

On March 14 and 22, President el-Sisi announced a 100 billion pound fund to deal with the Covid-19 crisis to great acclaim in the media. It was later revealed that Prime Minister Mostafa Kemal Madbouly's directive allocated only one billion pounds for health care. After which the Minister of Finance announced that the budget allocated to health was, in fact, just 188 million pounds, and that the rest had been allocated to support businesses. Indeed, so far 20 billion pounds have been spent to support the stock market while 50 billion pounds have gone to help the tourism sector.

Increase in compensation for medical professions

El-Sisi's announcement that he was increasing compensation for medical professions by 75 percent shocked doctors because this increase was not exceed 400 pounds, or 25 U.S. dollars, an insignificant amount. Meanwhile, there is a court decision dating back to 2015 ordering an increase of 1,000 pounds for physicians working with infectious diseases. The government refuses to implement this decision and the Ministry of Health itself has appealed it. As of today, a doctor still receives only 19 pounds compensation for exposure to infectious diseases. The compensation for health professionals was initially approved in 2014, following a determined fight by doctors and a sixty-day strike by all health workers. The media welcomed el-Sisi's new measure despite the doctors' dissatisfaction, doing its job of polishing up the system in the face of public opinion.

An increase in doctors

According to a September 2019 law intended to address the serious shortage of doctors, salaries were to be raised to 2,200 pounds and they would be permitted to fulfill specialty training during their internships by means of working two years instead of one. President el-Sisi, publicly reiterated this law again on April 3, 2020. There was no explanation for this, except that his timing turns out to be an attempt to use the court ruling politically.

"Long live Egypt" funds allocated to quarantine costs

President el-Sisi decided on April 1 to dedicate "Long Live Egypt" funds to cover quarantine costs for Egyptians who returned from abroad before March 31 after dozens of Egyptians who returned from Kuwait refused to pay quarantine fees of 28,000 pounds per person at the airport hotel. Although the decision concerns only the latter, and those who returned later are required to sign an agreement to bear the full costs of quarantine as a condition for boarding an aircraft bound for Egypt, and the cost of the return trip is also their responsibility, the media hailed the decision and deliberately ignored its limited nature. Just as they ignored the fact that travelers in other countries do not have to bear the costs of medical quarantines upon returning home.

A "Republican decision" to test for infections at the National Cancer Institute

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Following the discovery of seventeen coronavirus infections among doctors and nurses at the National Cancer Institute, and despite the imperative of testing people who came in contact with the Institute's doctors, nurses, staff, and patients, the Ministry of Health initially refused to do so, triggering a major crisis. After which el-Sisi ordered the government to carry out tests of all employees at the Institute, including doctors, the nursing staff, and all the patients who visited the Institute during the two last weeks, as if such an obvious decision required the intervention of the President of the Republic in person.

There are many other examples of the political instrumentalization of the coronavirus crisis intended to enhance the military regime's image, at home and abroad, besides those we have cited here, for instance, decisions like suspending classes was announced by the Head of State. And sometimes, they even create a problem from scratch so the Head of State may step in to resolve it, such was the case with quarantine costs and the National Cancer Institute. Other times they simply restate decisions that have been taken previously, such as the remuneration for doctors who fulfilled specialty requirements during their internships.

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