

Egyptian population explosion worsens social unrest

560,000 extra births in 2012, compared with 2010, in country already struggling with depleted resources and too few jobs

- [Patrick Kingsley](#) in Cairo, [theguardian.com](#), Sunday 16 February 2014 18.36 GMT



A girl is carried among a crowd of protesters in Tahrir Square. Between 2006 and 2012 there was a 40% increase in births, in a country where 60% of people are under 30.

Photograph: Amr Dalsh / Reuters/Reuters

[Egypt](#) is struggling to contain a [population](#) explosion that has surged in the past three years, exacerbating many of the social tensions that indirectly led to the 2011 uprising.

The number of births in Egypt in 2012 was 560,000 higher than in 2010, according to the most recent statistics. It is the largest two-year increase since records began. The rise keeps Egypt on course to overtake countries such as Russia and Japan by 2050, when forecasters predict it will have more than 137.7 million people.

"It's the highest spike ever in all Egyptian history," said Magued Osman, director of Egypt's leading statistics firm, Baseera, and former head of a government thinktank. "It's unheard of to have such a jump in a two-year period."

The rising population is seen as a social timebomb which, if untackled, will exhaust Egypt's depleted resources, worsen a dire jobs market, and contribute to yet more [social frustration](#). With 60% of Egyptians under 30 already, a bulging population will further reduce the limited opportunities for young people.

"You can't maintain a good education system with this number of people," said Osman. "If the population increases, you need a parallel increase in the number of classes. Between 2006 and 2012 there was a 40% increase in the number of births. This means you need 91,000 new

classes just to keep the same average class size, which is already very high – at least 40, and in some governorates it's at 60."

Every year, more than 800,000 young Egyptians join the job market – which [already has an unemployment rate of 13.4%](#). With an unchecked birthrate and a falling deathrate, joblessness is expected to rise quickly, inevitably leading to further public anger.

"Now you [already] have a very high level of unemployment, especially among university graduates and young people," said Hussein Sayed, a statistics professor at Cairo University, and a population consultant for the UN. "Without any hopes and opportunities, those people become frustrated, and a serious source of unrest – and that was a major push-factor for the unrest in 2011."

An expanding population will also drain Egypt's natural resources. The country already faces [severe water](#), [energy](#) and [wheat](#) shortages – and [lacks the foreign currency reserves](#) needed to fund the import of extra supplies. "It's an issue that cuts across everything in Egypt," says Hala Youssef, the head of Egypt's national population council (NPC).

Experts say population control, which was relatively successful during the 80s and 90s, started to fall off the agenda during the last years of Hosni Mubarak's government – and was largely ignored in the chaos that followed his removal in 2011. And after [Mohamed Morsi](#), a religious conservative, was elected in 2012, that negligence became official policy. His administration publicly declared that population control was not a government concern.

"In the year under Morsi, the NPC was not working," said Youssef, while stressing Morsi's predecessors also bore responsibility. "The NPC had a conference in support of the UNFPA [UN population fund] on population and family planning – and I remember [Morsi's] assistant minister came to this meeting and said family planning was no longer a priority."

Under Morsi, population control was seen as an attempt to disrupt traditional family life, which did not play well with his socially conservative [Muslim Brotherhood](#). According to calculations by Hussein Sayed's colleagues, the MPs elected to the Islamist-dominated parliament of 2012 each had an average of five to six children, "which means that they were not keen on programmes that encourage people to stop at two children".

But according to Osman, a heightening of conservative values over the past few decades is just one explanation for the population explosion.

Changes to housing regulations in the 90s made it easier for couples to marry and move in together – perhaps leading to a surge in pregnancies. Low female employment may have also led to a greater focus on motherhood.

More recently, the administrative chaos that followed the 2011 uprising led to a drop off in contraception-related awareness programmes. "In a time of revolution," Osman said, "there is a mess in terms of public health."

But now the cogs are slowing turning again at government level, Youssef reports. Family planning awareness programmes are back in motion – though Youssef is keen to emphasise their voluntary nature, for fear of causing offence in a conservative society.

About 65% of Egyptian women use some form of contraception. But Youssef hopes still more will follow if they are made aware of the economic and health benefits of having fewer children. "It's their right to choose whether to use family planning methods or not," she said. "But they have to know what the hazards of not doing it are."

In Egypt's rural south, where literacy rates are lower, locals form only 25% of the total population, but contribute to 41% of new births, according to Baseera – highlighting the need for better awareness programmes.

But contraception would just be one part of a successful population strategy. Egypt's estimated 86 million inhabitants live on no more than 8% of its mainly desert landmass, according to Osman, so overcrowding could be eased by encouraging moves to lower density areas. The country also needs more jobs, as well as improved healthcare and education.

Youssef's NPC has put in place a strategy that will promote girls' education, encourage geographic redistribution, campaign against child marriage, and educate young people about sexual and reproductive health, and family planning.

But whether Egypt's political class understands the importance of supporting such initiatives remains to be seen, according to Sayed.

"The horizon of this problem is very long, which is contradictory to the horizons of politicians," Sayed said. "Usually politicians want quick results that will enhance their reputation now. But with population you need some kind of long-term vision."



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