

Water Privatization Overlooked as Factor in Egypt's Revolt

Mubarak's water policies contributed to the Arab Spring Protest movement

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Rising water prices forced some Egyptians to draw water from polluted canals. (Photo by [Hossam el-Hamalawy](#) under a Creative Commons license from flickr.com)

The American media focused mainly on internal corruption and oppression [as causes of the Arab Spring revolution last year]. They did not report on the role of the international superpowers in influencing the Mubarak regime to privatize the country's public land and water; they did not report, for instance, that since the 1990s the World Bank has argued that privatization enhances "efficiency" and has mandated the policy as a condition for making loans; and that in 2004 this mandate led the Egyptian government to privatize its water utilities, transforming them into corporations which were required to operate at a profit, and which thus began to practice "full cost recovery"—passing along the cost of new infrastructure through rate increases.

Within months of privatization, the price of water doubled in some areas of Cairo, and citizens started to protest. At one demonstration in northern Cairo, in 2005, "angry residents chased bill collectors down the streets." Those who could not afford the new rates had little choice but to go to the city's outskirts to collect water from the dirty Nile River canals.



In 2007, protestors in the Nile Delta blocked the main coastal road after the regional water company diverted water from farming and fishing towns to affluent resort communities. "The authorities sent riot police to put down these 'disturbances,'" wrote Philip Marfleet, a professor at the University of East London, even as "water flowed uninterrupted to the gated communities, and to country clubs and upmarket resorts of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea."

In the next few years such demonstrations only grew in intensity. As activist Abdel Mawla

Ismail has noted, “Thirst protests or intifadas, as some people have called them, started to represent a new path for a social movement.” From this path the revolution that consumed the nation in 2011 seems inevitable. People can live in poverty for a long time; they cannot live without water.

Here is Karen Piper’s full essay [Revolution of the Thirsty](#) on the Design Observer Group website. [Also posted on Global Research](#)

An English professor at the University of Missouri in Columbia, she is now at work on a book about water privatization.

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