



## Cairo street traders squeezed out in push to make city 'revolution free'

Unregulated markets that burgeoned after Egypt's popular uprising are under attack from city authorities suspected of seeking to smother free expression

**Jared Malsin in Cairo**

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**A**bout 9pm on a hot summer night, the street vendors of the Ataba district of Cairo are bellowing their prices at the people flowing past. One of them, Mostafa Hussein, is selling men's clothes from a rack on a noisy corner. His shirts have jagged cuts and stripe patterns and are all, he says, Egyptian made.

As vibrant as it may seem, Hussein's trade is endangered in parts of Cairo. Over the past year, under the rule of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, security forces have ousted street sellers from the core of the city centre and prominent locations such as Ramses Square, home to Cairo's main train terminal.



An Egyptian street vender sells bread as police fire teargas during clashes with protesters near Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2013  
Photograph: Khaled Desouki/Getty Images

“They cleared out Talaat Harb street and they cleared out Ramses. But not here. Why? Because this is the majority of the Egyptian economy,” Hussein, 26, said, gesturing at a street filled with vendors hawking jeans, wallets, luggage, plastic toys and a multitude of other items.

The crackdown on street vendors is only one part of a broader attempt by Egyptian authorities to transform central Cairo from the chaos that resulted from the uprising in 2011. The revolution that ended the rule of Hosni Mubarak yielded both an explosion of protest culture and a proliferation of street commerce.

Between 2011 and 2013, police no longer harassed the vendors who colonised more and more pavements and streets. Like graffiti and protesters, vendors hawking everything from sweet potatoes or candy floss to fake leather jackets became a more dominant feature of street life.

But the atmosphere of anarchy in the capital came to an end soon after Egypt’s military removed President Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2013. Sisi’s new military-backed government has banned unapproved street protests and jailed thousands in a clampdown on Islamists, protesters and other dissidents.

At the same time, observers say, the current campaign to “clean up” downtown Cairo is an urban illustration of the reassertion of the state in public space.

Karim Ibrahim, the cofounder of Takween, an urban development organisation, said: “This comes as a part of the state’s attempt to restore its status [to] before the revolution. We see a sudden attention to downtown, to turn it into a model of civilised cities. It’s an attempt to clear whatever the state considers a threat to this image.”

In addition to removing street vendors from certain areas of the capital, the government has also cleaned and repainted the facades of buildings in key public places, including Tahrir Square, which was the dynamic centre of the 2011 revolution. The government has landscaped Tahrir with grass and erected a towering 20-metre pillar that flies the national flag.





The circular patch of land in Cairo's central Tahrir Square – the centre of the 2011 popular uprising – has been landscaped.  
Photograph: Asmaa Waguih/Reuters/Corbis

This summer, the Cairo governorate announced it would enforce a ban on tuk-tuks – motorised three-wheeled vehicles – in eight districts. Though tuk-tuks are an icon of working-class life in Egypt, the governorate says it is cracking down on the vehicles because they create chaos and congestion on the streets. Forty-eight of the vehicles have been seized by the authorities in recent days, according to the deputy governor, Egypt's *Al-Masry Al-Youm* newspaper reported.

Omar Nagati, an architect, urban planner and founder of Cairo Lab for Urban Studies Training and Environmental Research (Cluster), said part of the remaking of central Cairo is “seemingly apolitical – who would argue against a traffic light? Who would argue against fewer cars?” But, he added, “underlying that there are other agendas”.

“You can call it ‘revolution-free’ downtown. Street vendors are only one side,” he said. “There’s another layer, hangouts for activists and artists and journalists, all these kind of troublemakers who are viewed by the establishment as partially the instigators of the chaos that took place.”

Though the street vendors and tuk-tuk drivers have been pushed out of certain areas of the capital, the economic conditions that compel many Egyptians to work in the street remain. In 2014, Egypt's finance minister estimated that the “informal sector” constituted 30% of the economy and employed 40% of the workforce.



A street vendor selling bananas close to a market in Cairo.  
Photograph: Mohamed Abd El Ghany/Reuters/Corbis

Mostafa, the shirt vendor in Ataba, says working on the street is a last resort. On a typical day, he takes home about 40 Egyptian pounds (£3.30). He says he'd rather find work as a mechanic, but job opportunities are scarce.

A few streets over, patriotic songs are blaring at a celebration of the expansion of the Suez Canal, a megaproject hyped by the government as a turning point for the Egyptian economy. Mostafa, however, is sceptical. “The new canal will benefit the provinces along the canal - Suez, Ismailia. What about us?”

Nearby, Mohsen Abdel Al, 36, is selling Chinese-made suitcases. He says he’s worked as a street vendor since 1998 although he studied business for four years. In spite of the crackdown on vendors, he prefers the current political situation. “It’s much better now than during the revolution. In those days we were scared to go into the streets,” he says.

“If the police come, I’ll try to find an alternative spot. Or do something else,” he said. “If there was a better place for us to go, I’d go tomorrow.”

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