Five years ago, the chant “El sha’ab, yureed, isqat el nizam!” (“the people want the fall of the regime!“) resounded through the streets of Cairo, marking the start of a popular uprising that saw one of the region’s longest-standing dictators deposed in just 18 days.

The so-called Egyptian revolution of 2011, part of the wider trend of the Arab Springs or Arab Awakening , was seen by many as being as significant as the fall of the Berlin Wall because of its potential implications for both the country and the region. However, five years on, it seems as if little has changed in Egypt – and the country’s proud revolutionary spirit has been almost completely wiped out.

The demands made by Tahrir Square’s revolutionaries haven’t been met – and in some cases they have been downright betrayed.

The uprising was only in part triggered by the first spasm of the Arab Awakenings, Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution . Rather, it was an outburst of popular grievances that had been building up for decades in a country with a long history of both military authoritarianism and “street politics”.

Hosni Mubarak’s regime was an exemplary case of durable authoritarianism, allowing its citizens just enough political space to keep direct threats to the regime at bay. But this admittedly very limited space nonetheless made the country’s population extremely competent with the practice of politics and dissent in the street. Essentially, a strong regime was deposed by an even stronger society .

This can be seen in the fact that in January 2011, Egyptians were not just calling for the fall of the regime: louder than all the other chants was the call for “bread, freedom, and (human) dignity”. It was estimated at the time that about 40% of Egyptians lived below the poverty line; even higher percentages had to rely on subsidised goods and 2.5m aged 20-24 were unemployed .

But looking at the statistics today, it's clear that levels of poverty and unemployment have drastically worsened since 2011 – and especially since president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's dictatorial regime took the reins.

Bread, freedom and dignity

When the uprising began, the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square were quick to issue an official statement containing their main demands . They called for the removal of the Mubarak government and the abolition of the notorious Emergency Law, freedom, justice, the formation of a new, non-military government and the constructive administration of all of Egypt's resources.

The popular struggle for dignity and a removal of an ancient and discriminatory status quo seemed to succeed at first. Mubarak was deposed on February 11 2011, and the square resounded with euphoric chants: "Lift your head up, you are an Egyptian", and, "We can breathe fresh air, we can feel our freedom".

But the elation was short lived. Five years on and one coup d’état later, Egypt is still very much in the grip of a military dictatorship, while most of the six demands put forward by the revolutionaries have yet to be met.

The need for "bread, freedom, and (human) dignity" has arguably never been more urgent. Youth unemployment rates rose to 26.3% in 2015, while more than a quarter of Egypt's 85m-odd people still live below the poverty line.

As for "the formation of a new, non-military government with the interest of the Egyptian people at heart", the regime of al-Sisi is firmly in the country's tradition of military dictatorships. Most of his cabinet members and ministers hold the same posts they did under Mubarak . Al-Sisi has arguably even succeeded in creating a regime even more repressive and brutal than his predecessor's. Mubarak's "deep state" has not only endured, but in fact seems reinvigorated, while Egypt's former president has also been released from jail despite the fact that he is still facing charges of corruption and murder .

Cracking down

The saga of the Emergency Law is equally bleak. After it expired on May 31 2012, it was briefly re-imposed by the acting president Adly Mansour; it has since been substituted by the controversial Assembly Law of 2013, which also tightly restricts freedom of all sorts.

It not only heavily limits freedom of assembly, but also gives authorities the power to disperse any meeting of "public nature" of more than ten people in a public space, allows police to forcibly disperse any public meeting or protest, and sets heavy prison sentences for vague offences such as " attempting to influence the course of justice ".

Freedom of speech and expression have never been so tightly policed. In the aftermath of the t rial of three al-Jazeera journalists , Egypt was recently named the world's third deadliest country for journalists , just behind Syria and Iraq. The authorities have detained, charged, or sentenced at least 41,000 people between July 2013 and May 2014 alone. Hundreds more have been sentenced to death and tried in absentia .

Finally, the demand for better public administration has been left unaddressed; al-Sisi's celebrated US$6 billion renovation of the Suez Canal has been almost entirely funded with tax payers' money, redirecting funds originally earmarked for social services and healthcare.

The ultimate result of all the relentless brutality and pressure from the authorities since 2011 is that Egypt's proud revolutionary spirit has been almost entirely wiped out. The return to military authoritarianism has in fact left many Egyptians apathetic towards the political state of their own country, a sad comedown from the sentiment behind the original Tahrir Square protests.

In December 2015, al-Sisi responded to rumours of another "Day of Rage" on the fifth anniversary of January 25 by saying: "Why am I hearing calls for another revolution? Why do you want to ruin Egypt? I came by your will and your choice and not despite it" – an eerie echo of Mubarak’s own words before he was removed in 2011 .

This article has been updated to correct the phrase “El sha’ab, yureed, isqat el nizam!”.

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Read more http://theconversation.com/five-years-on-the-spirit-of-tahrir-square-has-been-all-but-crushed-53461