Food Riots: Poverty, Power and Protest

RAY BUSH

This paper explores the phenomenon of food riots. It argues that the riots may have been triggered by spikes in food prices in 2007–8, but there were many other factors that underpinned them. Demonstrators challenged injustice, inequality and political repression. Food riots were part of an important groundswell of mobilization that brought together a wide range of political coalitions for change and the promotion of human dignity.

Keywords: riots, protest, resistance, food, politics

There were an unprecedented number of protests and ‘food riots’ in the global South between 2007 and the end of 2008. Demonstrations, marches and rallies in more than 25 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Americas and the Caribbean highlighted the social and economic consequences of dramatically increased food prices (Schneider 2008). This contribution focuses on riots in Africa and the Middle East.

If the immediate cause of unrest was the increase in world food prices by 83 per cent compared with 2005 – the price of wheat rose by 130 per cent and rice doubled in price in the first three months of 2008 – the price increases also provided a catalyst for political mobilization and an opportunity to voice out dissent about a much broader range of concerns.

The riots particularly highlighted two important issues. The first is the way in which food insecurity and famine is an integral part of late capitalism. There should no longer be surprise that death by starvation and chronic malnutrition are systemic features of capitalism and that people resist. Food is a commodity and its use value, unlike those of most other commodities, provides for the maintenance and reproduction of life itself. But like any commodity, food also has an exchange value and for that to be realized food has to be purchased: if you do not have access to cash to purchase food (and you cannot access it in any other way), you will experience food insecurity, malnutrition and worse, death. Although there is much hand-wringing and rhetoric in the international financial, food and relief agencies that the one billion people in the world who are undernourished will be reduced, this cannot happen if the contemporary international food regime remains hegemonic, creating and recreating the simultaneous conditions of plenty and starvation. These twins are linked: the accumulation of food stocks challenges the opportunities for

Ray Bush, Professor of African Studies and Development Politics, POLIS, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT. e-mail: r.c.bush@leeds.ac.uk

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the hungry to feed themselves when poor countries cannot afford to purchase from those stocks and there are international and local obstacles to food production and access. Food mountains do not prevent immizeration and dispossession – they help generate it. There were record grain harvests in 2007 but the numbers of hungry continued to grow. It is not surprising, then, to see that the ‘rebellions that quickly spread across the globe took place not in areas where war or displacement made food unavailable, but where available food was too expensive for the poor’ (Holt-Giménez 2008, 16).

The global food ‘crisis’ is as much about poor people being unable to sustain their access to food, and is thus about poverty, power and politics, as it is about issues of production, productivity and contested debate about technological quick fixes to population growth. These latter concerns influence the global institutional characterizations of food crises. In 2009 the World Bank responded to the food crisis with short-term ‘band aids’ of assistance with food purchases for poor countries and for the poor within those countries. But this is not a panacea in an international food regime that is structured by and (re)produces global inequality (Friedmann 1993; McMichael 2009). Thus the enlargement of the World Bank’s Global Food Crisis Response Programme to $2 billion in April 2009, in support of global efforts to cope with food crisis and reduce resistance in affected countries, was an attempt to underpin the existing global food system. The system that the World Bank sought to underpin is the system that has created food insecurity and political opposition to it. Reform and transformation of the world food system requires a democratization of local and international food organizations and local producer associations: this is far beyond the ideological radar of the IFIs. They seem able only to offer palliative cases of a sporadic ad hoc variety. These may reduce hunger (temporarily) in isolated cases and in so doing suggest that a systemic remedy is being offered, when it is not.

It is thus disingenuous to suggest that chronic hunger will be reduced, as international agencies claim. It is clear from repeated failed targets to redress hunger that emerge from world food summits, conferences and millennium development goals that international capitalism cannot resolve the world food crises. The abundance of food stocks amid hunger is a key feature of modernity (Edkins 2000), the worst element of many failures that are marked by capitalist globalization, financial crashes, war and militarization, and the uneven spread of transnational corporate activity.

The IFIs and international commentators quickly characterized the ‘global food crisis’ as one of food shortages and high prices. These were the result of a combination of poor weather, low grain reserves, high oil prices, agro-fuels and increased global meat consumption. These were only triggers, however, that...

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Rhetoric abounds, and has done for 35 years, that the representatives of international capital can resolve world hunger. For example, compare the following statements: ‘Within a decade no man, woman or child will go to bed hungry’ (Henry Kissinger, World Food Conference, 1974); ‘We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015’ (World Food Summit Rome Declaration, 1996); ‘We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditional of extreme poverty’ (Millennium Declaration, 2001).
undermined a fragile food system in 2007 that was constructed on corporate power and grain subsidies, amongst other things. This was the power that had destroyed Southern food production systems, and converted the global South from generating trade surpluses in agricultural goods 40 years ago to being food deficit countries (Holt-Giménez 2008, 15–16).

The second issue to explore, which is the focus of this paper, is the extent to which the food riots were concerned with only pressuring national governments to reduce the price of food. Did the struggles that were precipitated by demands for affordable access to food provide a catalyst for assembling demands that went beyond the cost of the food basket? And from where did the pressure for demonstrations emerge? In many different parts of the world – Egypt, Mexico, Mauritania and Bangladesh – rioter protest went beyond calls to reduce the price of food. The largely urban-based protests also critiqued the impact of existing globalization, international food regimes that transformed local systems of production and distribution, and political elites (authoritarian regimes) that benefited from the status quo. In this sense, the riots may not be different from those commented upon 15 years ago as ‘fundamentally a product of the international political economy’ (Walton and Seddon 1994, 23). In the 1980s and 1990s, protests in the global South were seen as reactions to debt, structural adjustment and IFI-imposed austerity. Recent protest lamented the consequences of worsening poverty within developing countries and between the global South and capitalist heartlands. And it was mostly among the urban poor that violent protest erupted, with hundreds of deaths world-wide. More than 200 Guineans died in protests in 2007 as the government was forced by the IMF to end a range of energy subsidies (allAfrica.com 2008).

Although the most urgent problems facing humanity continue to be international (Löwy 2002), they are rooted in local and national struggles of dispossession and transformation. Food riots are part of the resistance to globalization and the uneven spread of capitalist relations of production. They are a pragmatic and usually unorganized but extremely effective declaration by a hybrid of urban and rural social classes that protest the ways in which their livelihoods have been transformed.

Yet it was convenient for media and governments affected by food riots to label them as symptomatic of only the short-term increase in the (food) costs of living. Those increases were seen to be driven by extraneous and uncontrollable processes of the world market – issues beyond the control of government. Yet closer investigation reveals that rioters knew why food prices were high and who benefited from food inflation. Rioters knew too why governments had to be forced to mitigate the social costs of food inflation, why and how authoritarian regimes appeased transnational food companies, and how national food strategies impoverished food producers: low farm-gate prices were well-tested mechanisms to extract surplus for largely urban-based development. Food rioters demonstrated with slogans that ‘we are hungry’ and they knew why. People continued to be hungry in a world where there were grain surpluses. The surpluses diminished in 2007, with global reserves at their lowest since 1982, but the pressure on global food stocks from market deregulation, poor weather in exporting countries and speculation by grain merchants precipitated food crises and food riots across the globe (La Via Campesina 14 February 2008).
RESISTING REPRESSION AND PROMOTING POLITICAL REFORM

There are several important cases where demonstrations against food price rises indicate the ways in which immediate concerns over the cost of living were just one dimension of deeper underlying political and economic dissatisfaction. Although the demonstrations and riots were sometimes precipitated by food price rises, the protests usually included demands to reduce political repression, promote political reform and curtail the influence of international firms. These riots were influential in West Africa and the Middle East.

Riots in West Africa

There were food riots and protests across most of West Africa between 2007 and the end of 2008. In Burkina Faso in February 2008, riots took place in Bobo-Dioulasso, Ouahigouya and Banfora. These were prompted by an increase in tax collection from small traders at a time of rising food prices. Crowds of traders, youths and other urban poor targeted public buildings, shops and security personnel. Riots also took place in poor neighbourhoods of Ouagadougou (Harsch 2008). The state responded by arresting more than 300 people, many of whom received prison terms. In March, the government tried to take the sting out of the riots by reducing customs duties on key consumer goods.

Attempts to coordinate what began as largely urban-based and spontaneous rioting were made by Laurent Ouédraogo, the Secretary-General of the General Work Confederation of Burkina. A national coalition against the cost of living forced the government to agree to emergency subsidies, worth almost $US 28 million, for fertilisers, seeds and farming equipment (Traoré 2008). Yet despite a cereal surplus of 700,000 tons in 2008, prices continued to rise.

Price hikes reverberated more strongly in Senegal and Mauritania, where there was a high dependence on imported wheat and rice. In Dakar, European vegetables and Thai rice were cheaper than their nationally produced counterparts (Afrique en ligne 2008). The catalysis for rioting in November 2007 was President Abdoulaye Wade’s attempt to curb informal street hawking, on which thousands depended. The attempt at a street ‘clean-up’ led to enormous street protest, which closed the city’s main arteries in March 2008, with burning roadblocks and the pillaging of the mayor’s office and that of Senelec (the national electricity company). The protest against the cost of living was organized by the United Front of Central Unions and other trades unions, which demanded a reduction in food costs and housing prices, an increase in salaries and support for struggling businesses. Demonstrators, including teachers and public servants, shouted ‘we are hungry’! Police responded violently, their actions including the arrest of organizers.

Protest in Senegal was persistent. In April 2008, over a thousand demonstrated in Dakar against the cost of living, carrying empty rice sacks and unpaid utility bills. President Wade pledged to reduce the country’s dependence on imported rice (Ba 2008). He also requested the removal of the FAO, stating that it had failed to manage the crisis and was an ‘abyss’ of money largely spent on its own functioning, with very few effective operations on the ground (Bangré 2008). The Grand Agricultural Offensive for Food and Abundance (GOANA) was launched, aimed
ambitiously for Senegalese self-sufficiency by 2015, but this failed to address issues of food production and rural development.

Neighbouring Mauritanian households experience widespread and sustained hunger. Price hikes in early November 2007 triggered ‘bread riots’ that cascaded towards Nouakchott. Violent demonstrations lasted ten days (Rivière 2007). In the southeastern district of Kobeni, two opposition leaders, from the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) and the Mauritanian Union for Change (PMUC), were arrested on suspicion of provoking the riots (Magharebia 2007). By December, the price of millet was 50 per cent higher than the previous year, sorghum had doubled in price and maize had increased by 60 per cent. Prices continued to increase into 2008, and in June, the FAO sent 500 tonnes of sorghum, maize, millet and cowpea seeds to six regional capitals (Afrol News 2008a). The government responded in a similar way to that of Senegal, by developing a special intervention programme to supply emergency food, and by introducing price controls. Tax exemption measures for imported rice and subsidies to large public enterprises including water, power and gas were planned, along with an increase in civil servants’ salaries (Afrol News 2008b). These measures did not prevent a coup d’état on 8 August 2008 and may indeed have provoked it. The military takeover led to sanctions by the African Union. Mauritania was also put on the EU and US watch list as a country from where ‘hunger refugees’ might try to emigrate to Europe, threatening EU immigration policy and adding to the constructed fear that Europe would be swamped by hungry Africans fleeing from starvation and other deprivations (Ziegler 2008).

The Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East provides many cases where urban and rural poor as well as the middle class demonstrated against spiralling food prices and persistent local corruption, repressive government and poverty. Middle-class and urban workers protested in Jordan in February 2008 when fuel prices rose by 76 per cent and basic food costs more than doubled. An increase in public-sector pay did not offset price increases and the poor were joined by middle-class discontents unable to maintain their lifestyles. More than 12 people died in demonstrations in Yemen at the end of 2007. At least one protester was killed and 18 injured as police fired on protesters in Tunisia in June 2008. This was reminiscent of rioting in January 1984, when there had been an attempt to remove food subsidies. Almost 25 years later, protesters were dealt with harshly. Ostensibly a food protest, members of the General Union of Tunisian Workers first complained about fraudulent employment practices at a large phosphate company, where anger escalated to criticism of the government and the high cost of living. Police and security forces arrested hundreds of protesters and two trade union leaders were imprisoned for eight years.

There was further brutal repression of food protests and struggles for political liberalization in Syria and Morocco, and there was also dissent in the wealthy oil-producing states. In Saudi Arabia, cost-of-living rises led to concerns that austerity might lead to conflict, and in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates migrant workers protested that the value of their already meagre wages fell because they were paid in currencies pegged to the value of the dollar.
Egypt: A Beacon for Revolution?

Some of the most violent and extensive food riots and opposition to authoritarian government took place in Egypt during 2008. More than half of Egypt’s 80 million population live below the poverty line. Poor people’s access to subsidies, especially for bread, is a crucial lifeline. Egypt is food insecure; it is the second largest global importer of wheat and in recent years has embarked upon a costly and unproductive greening of the desert west of Lake Nasser (Bush 2007). It has also liberalized its agriculture sector since 1987, failing to meet the declared promises from the IFIs and USAID that market reform would boost exports, improve food security and reduce rural poverty (USAID 1992, 1998, 1999; World Bank 2001). As the price of wheat more than tripled between the summer of 2007 and mid-2008, Egypt’s poor experienced increased deprivation as the Government of Egypt (GoE) tried to reduce subsidies and the size of the subsidized loaf.

Egypt offers Western visitors and diplomats an image of a civilized democratic state in the Middle East – a bridge to Israel and a broker of Middle East peace – and of regional cosmopolitanism to Arab League partners. Yet the veil of democracy hides repression, political detainees and a rapacious class of government bureaucrats and crony capitalists.

There were unprecedented strikes and protests in 2007–8. These were on an extraordinary scale, with more than 400,000 workers occupying factories, striking, demonstrating and promoting collective action (Beinen and El-Hamalawy 2007; Beinen 2008). The rioting and demonstrations were also spread geographically. And the demonstrations and protests brought together a coalition of forces that expressed an unprecedented and open critique of the corrupt government, the President and the security forces.

The background to the protests that culminated in April 2008 was a series of challenges to the GoE. There had been unparalleled demands by a broad coalition (of mainly urban and middle-class Cairenes) under the banner of Kifaya (enough) that protested against President Mubarak standing for a further fifth term of office in 2005. Kifaya also demanded that Mubarak’s son Gamal should not succeed him and that the office of the President should have less power. Street demonstrations emerged in the wake of constitutional amendments, hurried through the Egyptian Parliament in early 2007, that the GoE declared necessary to rid Egypt of socialist principles and promote foreign investments. The reforms also withdrew judicial oversight of elections, which are routinely corrupt and marred by violence.

Kifaya initiated many large-scale demonstrations from 2004. These were invariably crushed by riot police, and a link was seldom if ever made between Kifaya and organized labour and farmers. This was not surprising, rooted as Kifaya was in Cairo’s middle class and the broad coalition that was at its core. The coalition included the Moslem Brotherhood and leftist groups offering considerable breadth of appeal. But the broad coalition also offered a structural weakness that limited its political muscle. This was a failure to support mushrooming working-class opposition to appalling living conditions, and also to link with the mass of rural poor, landless and near landless and the more than one million tenants, many of whom had failed to recover from the reform of tenancy in 1992 (Saad 2002).
Egypt’s food riots were driven by worker strikes, occupations and industrial actions in both the private and public sectors. There were more than 580 ‘episodes of industrial action’ in 2007 (Bienen 2008) and those involved broadened from industrial workers to white-collar employees, including an incredible strike in December 2007 of 55,000 local government tax collectors. The culmination of persistent and, for the government, an increasingly worrying spread of industrial actions came in April 2008, in the industrial town Mahalla al-Kubra, north of Cairo. Workers from Egypt’s biggest textile company with 27,000 workers, Misr Spinning and Weaving Co., had agreed in January 2008 to hold a strike on 6 April. The strike was to claim improvements in salary and for the payment of unpaid bonuses. Earlier industrial action in December 2006 and September 2007 had demonstrated the enormous strength of wildcat strikes, where workers broke from state-run trade unions, but the company reneged on agreements won from previous industrial action.

The failure of the company to meet its promises and responsibilities ran alongside state plans for accelerated privatization. When workers feared that private investors would not meet claims for back pay, pensions and other benefits, a strike was called for 6 April 2008. Worker solidarity led to demands for change from workers in Mahalla. A wide-ranging manifesto was assembled that went beyond calls for a reduction in food prices and improved wages to the need for conditions that would help ‘freedom and dignity’, and an end to arbitrary arrests, police torture and ‘the manipulation of the judiciary’ (see Khawaga 2007; Rady 2008).

The planned 6 April strike became a beacon for other workers to demand a national strike for improved wages to cover the increased costs of basic foods. Food prices rose by 33 per cent between 2005 and 2008 for meat and by 146 per cent for chicken (Beinen 2008).

The GoE was rattled by the severity of worker demands, the conviction of the worker committees and the wider message that this unrest would send to other workers. Worker pressure led to the company meeting many demands; improvements in pay, doubling of monthly food allowances and promises for free transport to work. The strike was called off, but the continued presence of security forces in Mahalla led on 6 April to a spontaneous and sustained protest against the company and the government. The police and security forces intervened violently. Firing live rounds, they killed two people, including a 15-year-old student who was standing on his family balcony. More than 300 were arrested and many protesters were badly beaten. Criticism of the President and the ruling party was unprecedented.

The protest in Mahalla was not the beginning of a workers’ revolution but the way in which the demonstrations linked food prices to ongoing and sustained worker struggles for pay and conditions, as well as the need for improved general service provision. The pay rises that workers received left those at the higher end of the pay scale with LE975. But the UN estimates that to avoid the poverty level of $2 per person, an Egyptian head of household (supporting 3.7 people) would need to make LE1,200 a month. Put more starkly, the real wages of workers in Egypt in 2009 were less than they were in 1952.

The authority of the GoE was challenged in a way that it had not been since Mubarak became president in 1981. The call for a general strike was not met, although there were some stay-aways and small-scale demonstrations. Kifaya was
unable (or unwilling) to harness working-class dissent to a civil society quest to loosen authoritarian government. Important links had been promoted with workers who realized the power of withdrawing labour and who had links to a number of small-scale Marxist organizations. The GoE had been called to account, and a high-profile visit to Mahalla after two days of rioting confirmed this, as Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif conceded payments of a month’s bonus for Misr company workers and 15 days for all textile workers.

Rural Egypt

An area where the protesters failed to make broader coalition with other dissenting groups was with the rural poor. Egypt’s countryside also experienced discontent. That was largely the outcome of changes in tenancy law that had revoked Nasser’s reforms giving rights and economic security to tenants and rural poor. Since economic reform had begun in the countryside in 1987, small-scale farmers had suffered from the withdrawal of state guarantees, the promotion of market reform and increased poverty, clashes over land boundaries, struggles over access to irrigation and attempts by landowners, many of whom were absentee, to claim land that was not always covered by the new tenancy legislation. In other words, changes in agrarian reform, or Mubarak’s counter revolution that dismantled Nasser’s redistributive reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, aggravated rural poverty and failed to raise agricultural productivity.

The 1992 tenure reform gave security forces a free hand to deliver property to landlords and continuous repression and violence ensured that rural protest was often muted. Opposition to the return of the landlords did take place though, and formed part of the dissent that contributed to the food riots of 2008. Rural dissent took the form of the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ (Bayat 2002; see also Tingay 2007). Resistance of everyday struggles, over access to resources within communities and challenges to local office holders, landowners and bureaucrats, were fuelled by price inflation. Farmer mobilization challenged the impacts of privatization of land and local inequality that became increasingly more evident, but this opposition was very uneven. Scott (1990) has called this infra-politics, where ‘footdragging’ and ‘gossip’ may be used by farmers to counter surveillance and authoritarianism.

CONCLUSION

Understanding why the food riots and protests took place in 2007 and 2008 is clearly important. I have indicated that most of the struggles were urban based and went beyond discontent with the spike in food prices. It is important to remember the riots, rioters and those who lost their lives in struggles for human decency not the least because they are largely absent from the ‘development’ literature. If there is mention of the food riots, it is likely to record dissent as aberrant acts of the hungry rather than anything that challenged the status quo. But we can see that the

3 The Land Center for Human Rights, Cairo, estimated that between January 1998 and December 2000 there were 119 deaths, 846 injuries and 1,409 arrests relating to Law 96 and linked land conflict (Land Center for Human Rights 2002, 127).
riots were very much linked with broader issues of poverty and resistance to it, and outrage that politicians ignored the suffering that this generated.

Reflection on the food riots needs to explore urban and rural protest that combined resistance to poverty and food price inflation with despair and struggles for the democratization of food regimes and political liberalization. The food price riots brought together urban and rural issues of solidarity and protest, and they remind us of the importance of asking whether the resistance mirrored in any way the mode of development. If capitalist development is combined and uneven in its spread and consequences, it is likely that resistance to it will not be uniform or easy to simply read off from the mode of development. Actual struggles are shaped by concrete experiences – concrete relations of production and reproduction. And these struggles are local struggles, although they may take place in conditions that are also shaped by the political and economic internationalization of capital.

Did the food riots offer glimpses of coherent, sustained and deliverable responses to the crises of the global food system? And did governments merely act to quell violence with state violence and palliatives of temporary price controls? It was certainly easier for governments to hope that world markets would lose their ‘volatility’ rather than for them to address issues of agricultural policy such as uneven access to land, inputs and markets. Additionally, it is important to ask which organizations have taken up the mantle of the food poor, not only in the countries where there was protest, but in countries that have subsequently had dramatic protests over crucial issues of agricultural and food policy such as South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

Two themes for further enquiry stand out. The first is the need to examine what form rural protest takes, especially as we have noted that the most dramatic examples seem to have been located in towns and capital cities by workers, the unemployed and trades unions. The Egyptian case indicates rural opposition to Mubarak’s counter revolution and there may be significant benefits to accrue to small farmers if they could establish political alliances with urban constituents. Further work is necessary to see which classes of rural producers have been engaged in political mobilization and food riots. The second issue is how local struggles and their specificity can inform international debate about reforming the global food system. Debates about its democratization, the promotion of food sovereignty and rights to food – as well as ‘social justice’, which has become important for world social forum and other advocacy arenas – might need to bring ‘the workers’ back into the equation for effective reform.

REFERENCES


