

Intersection of Food Riots, State-Wide Social Unrest and Demands for Institutional Reform in Africa and the Middle East: A Review From 1970-2024

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Abstract

This research article provides a comprehensive review of the complex interplay between food riots, broader social unrest, institutional reforms, and long-term developmental challenges in Africa and the Middle East from 1970 to 2024. Drawing upon a wide array of academic and institutional reports, the study establishes that food riots are not merely isolated expressions of hunger but are deeply embedded within larger socio-political grievances, often serving as critical catalysts for widespread social upheaval. The analysis reveals a recurring pattern where global food price shocks, coupled with domestic vulnerabilities such as climate change, weak governance, and structural economic issues, consistently trigger and exacerbate unrest. Institutional responses, both national and international, have varied in effectiveness, with approaches like broad subsidies often proving unsustainable and targeted interventions facing significant implementation barriers. The long-term consequences extend beyond immediate instability, severely impacting human development indicators, deepening poverty and inequality, and eroding social cohesion. The study concludes by synthesizing these findings, emphasizing the need for multi-faceted, context-specific policy approaches that address the root causes of food insecurity and foster resilient, inclusive development pathways.

Key words: Intersection; Food riots; State-wide social unrest; Institutional reform Africa; The Middle East

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food security, encompassing the availability, access, utilization, and stability of food, remains a fundamental global challenge, intricately linked to human well-being and societal stability. Despite significant advancements in agricultural productivity worldwide, regional disparities persist, leaving vast populations vulnerable to food crises. A critical manifestation of this vulnerability is the phenomenon of food riots, defined as public disturbances protesting a shortage and/or unequal distribution of food. These events are frequently triggered by sharp rises in food prices, widespread harvest failures, inefficient food storage, or systemic transport problems. Historically, food riots are rarely isolated incidents; they often emerge as integral components of larger social movements, such as the French or Russian Revolutions, signaling deeper societal discontent. Food scarcity and associated protest carry a formidable force to spark social movements and demands for institutional reform (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011).

The regions of Africa and the Middle East are particularly susceptible to the multifaceted challenges of food insecurity. This heightened vulnerability stems from a confluence of factors, including pronounced climate fragility, limited adaptive capacities, pervasive conflict, inherent state fragility, and a substantial reliance on food imports (Ayeb and Bush, 2019). Within these regions, poor populations bear a disproportionate burden, frequently allocating over half of their income to food

purchases, rendering them exceptionally sensitive to price fluctuations (Arezki and Brückner, 2011). The period spanning from 1970 to 2024 has been marked by several global food price crises, notably in 2007–2008, 2010–2011, and post-2022, which have consistently ignited and sustained social unrest across these regions. (Bellemare, 2015; Weinberg and Bakker, 2015)

The immediate translation of recurrent food crises into widespread social unrest highlights a crucial dimension: food is not merely an economic commodity but a deeply political one. The issue of class struggle comes into play, where several actors namely peasant farmers who are exploited by poor prices, wealthy class who could purchase food at whatever prices, middle men/cooperatives who stockpile excess food and decide exploitative favourable prices and government agencies: the precursor of failed food production system. The public's immediate and often violent reaction to food shortages or price hikes demonstrates a societal expectation that the state is responsible for ensuring basic sustenance. When this implicit social contract is perceived to be broken, the legitimacy of the governing authority is directly challenged. Historical instances, such as the 1977 Egyptian Bread Riots, where public outrage forced the government to reverse austerity measures, underscore this profound connection between food provision and political stability (AbdelRazik, 1978; Drainville, 2013). The recurring nature of these events over decades reinforces the understanding that food security is a critical barometer of state performance and a foundational element of political legitimacy in these regions (Arezki and Brückner, 2011).

This research undertakes a comprehensive review of the complex intersection of food riots, broader social unrest, institutional reform efforts, and persistent developmental issues in Africa and the Middle East. Covering the period from 1970 to 2024, the study aims to:

- i. Analyze the historical patterns and evolution of food-related unrest across the diverse countries within these regions.
- ii. Identify the key drivers and underlying causal mechanisms that link food insecurity to social instability.
- iii. Evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of various national and international institutional responses to food crises.
- iv. Assess the long-term developmental impacts, including socio-economic consequences and human development outcomes, stemming from these interconnected phenomena.

By synthesizing these critical dimensions, this review seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the historical trajectory and contemporary challenges at the nexus of food security and political stability in Africa and the Middle East.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Food Riots and Social Unrest in Academic Discourse

A precise understanding of “food riots” and “social unrest” is essential for a rigorous analysis of their intersection. A food riot, at its core, is a public disturbance arising from a protest against the scarcity or inequitable distribution of food. The historical catalysts for such events are diverse, including abrupt increases in food prices, widespread harvest failures, inadequate food storage infrastructure, logistical challenges in food transportation, speculative market practices, and the hoarding of essential commodities. These events are rarely spontaneous acts of a “mindless mob”; rather, they frequently form part of broader social movements, drawing parallels to historical upheavals such as the Russian or French Revolutions (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Drainville, 2013). These protests are not solely aimed at immediate looting but often represent a contentious performance, adhering to established repertoires rooted in prevailing social norms, and explicitly making political demands on ruling authorities to ensure a fair living for their populace (Thompson, 1971).

“Social unrest” serves as a broader analytical category, encompassing a wide spectrum of collective actions intended to disrupt a community or organization. This spectrum includes civil disorders, acts of mass civil disobedience, and strikes. These activities vary significantly in their legality, tactics (particularly the use or avoidance of violence), planning (from highly organized to completely spontaneous), and underlying motivations.

A study by Buhaug et al. (2015) views civil disorder as a public disturbance involving acts of violence that pose immediate danger, cause damage, or inflict injury to individuals or property. These disturbances are often, though not exclusively, politically motivated and are inherently illegal and violent. Within civil disorders, a distinction is often made between “communal riots,” which involve direct confrontations between two or more ethnic groups, and “commodity riots,” where violence is primarily directed at symbols of the prevailing social structure, such as shops or government buildings, rather than individuals (Buhaug, Gleditsch, and Theisen, 2015).

Civil disobedience involves the non-violent refusal to comply with specific laws as a deliberate act of political protest. While illegal, it is fundamentally non-violent, aiming to persuade the government to alter perceived unjust laws or policies. Meanwhile, **strikes** are organized work stoppages by employees designed to compel employers to meet their demands. While most strikes are legal and peaceful, they can, in certain contexts, escalate into illegal and violent confrontations.

The academic conceptualization of food riots extends beyond a simplistic interpretation of hunger-driven looting. Instead, these events are understood as **performative acts** that critically challenge the legitimacy of political power and existing systems (Scott, 1976). By taking to the streets, protesters remind rulers of their fundamental duty to ensure a fair standard of living for the governed. This perspective implies that fluctuations in food prices serve as a sensitive indicator of the health of the social contract between the state and its citizens. When food security is compromised, it signals a deeper breach of trust and an erosion of state legitimacy, transforming economic distress into a profound political challenge (Schatzberg, 2001).

2.2 What Really Triggers Food Riots in Africa and the Middle East?

As neglected and unpopular as the term food riots tends to be, the weight of societal change it can create is somewhat unimaginable. Over time, repeated food riots or hunger protests have generated structural changes in society. These changes go beyond the democratization of political institutions and the redistribution of wealth, permeating the developmental structure of welfare systems that provide greater economic security for the working class. In many cases, these reforms represent a response to the class struggle between the financial and political elites and the masses who have no social protection whatsoever.

Food riots often serve as a warning sign for governments, signaling that the public is increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. In many cases, food-related unrest forces governments to engage in reform, particularly in areas such as economic policy, social welfare, and food distribution systems (Hickey, 2019)]. These uprisings can push governments to implement changes that address the root causes of food insecurity, such as improving agricultural productivity, reducing corruption, or enhancing social safety nets for the poor.

However, the outcomes of food riots are not always immediately clear-cut. While some governments may respond with reforms, others may resort to repression or authoritarian measures to quell unrest. The aftermath of food-related protests can also result in political instability, especially when deep-seated structural issues are not adequately addressed.

According to Tilly (1975), food riots have been a historical consequence of resource scarcity. They represent the most immediate and visible form of social unrest arising from food shortages. **Inequality** is a critical factor in the outbreak of food protest and subsequent social reform. Social reform movements often arise when citizens demand changes to the systems that perpetuate inequities in resource distribution. The call for reform may include demands for more equitable food distribution, better economic policies, or political accountability.

Corruption, inefficient food distribution systems, or unjust policies can worsen the effects of scarcity, leading to further dissatisfaction among the population (Sarma, 2011). Throughout history, food riots have been among the most direct manifestations of resource scarcity and social unrest. A prime example of this is the **French Revolution of 1789**, which was partly driven by widespread hunger due to poor harvests and rising bread prices. The economic hardships faced by the French populace, coupled with rising inequality and political repression, contributed to mass protests that eventually led to the overthrow of the monarchy. Another study by Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1947) emphasized how food riots triggered the French Revolution.

Another example is the series of food riots that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 21st century, which were closely tied to rising food prices and economic instability. In Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries, food price increases, particularly for wheat and bread, were seen as a manifestation of economic mismanagement, contributing to widespread protests that eventually led to the **Arab Spring**. Between 2007 and 2008, the aftermath of the global food crisis, coupled with other unattended internal issues, led to riots in countries such as Haiti, Egypt, Nigeria, and Cameroon, where people took to the streets to protest the high cost of basic foodstuffs (Sachs, 2001). Haggard and Hendrix (Haggard and Hendrix, 2015) noted that the Arab Spring revolts were preceded by rising food prices and economic instability. The social unrest ultimately led to the overthrow of several governments and significant political change.

One of the most notable instances of food-related unrest in the Middle East occurred in Egypt in 1977. Following the Egyptian government's decision to cut subsidies on bread, a staple in the diet of many Egyptians, the price of bread surged dramatically (Drainville, 2013). This led to widespread riots across the country, particularly in the working-class areas of Cairo. The protests were fueled by anger over food prices, but they quickly morphed into a broader expression of dissatisfaction with the government of President Anwar Sadat.

2.3 Who Are the Most Vulnerable in Food Crisis-Ridden Regions?

Among the most vulnerable persons affected by a food crisis are low-income earners, who are mostly earning a "widow's mite" from the informal sector. Their wages and sometimes salary are not enough to handle basic household financial needs, let alone rising food costs. Marginalized or lower-income communities are more vulnerable to the effects of scarcity because they have fewer resources or entitlements to secure basic needs like food (Sen, 1981). For example, during a food crisis, the wealthier classes may be able to weather the storm by purchasing scarce food at higher prices, while poorer individuals are left to struggle or even starve. This creates a

sense of injustice and leads to social dissatisfaction, which can quickly escalate into organized protests or revolts.

The 1977 bread riots in Egypt were significant not only because they highlighted the economic hardship faced by many Egyptians but also because they exposed the vulnerability of the masses and the limits of Sadat's ability to manage economic transitions and the frustrations of the Egyptian populace (Ayebe and Bush, 2019). Sadat's government, which had been moving towards economic liberalization, was forced to reverse its decision on the bread subsidy cuts due to the scale of the protests. Although the immediate effect of the riots was the reinstatement of bread subsidies, the events set the stage for further political instability in Egypt, eventually contributing to the rise of Islamist movements and shaping the trajectory of the nation's political landscape in the years that followed.

Similarly, the Tunisian Revolution, which served as the catalyst for the broader Arab Spring, also had its roots in food insecurity and economic hardship. In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, set himself on fire in protest of police harassment and the confiscation of his goods. His act of self-immolation was the tipping point for mass protests, which were fueled by high unemployment, widespread corruption, and rising food prices.

The protests that followed rapidly spread throughout the country and were amplified by the economic frustrations of ordinary Tunisians, many of whom were suffering from food insecurity (Haggard and Hendrix, 2015). As food prices increased and the cost of living rose, more people became involved in the protests, which eventually led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after over 20 years in power. The Tunisian Revolution demonstrated the critical role of food insecurity in sparking broader political upheaval. The social unrest linked to food prices and economic inequality highlighted the deep structural issues within Tunisian society. In the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisia saw significant political reform, including the establishment of a new democratic government and the drafting of a new constitution. Thus, food-related protests not only contributed to regime change but also played a key role in reshaping the political and institutional landscape of Tunisia.

In Nigeria, food-related protests and riots have also been significant in shaping the political landscape and have been experienced on a yearly basis. During these periods, food prices skyrocket, and the wealthy class engages in bulk purchasing and food storage that will keep their households stable until a ceasefire. On the other hand, the poor masses face the greatest brunt of any food-related crisis (Otaha, 2013). In 2007, widespread protests erupted across Nigeria due to a sharp increase in the price of food, particularly the cost of fuel, which had direct repercussions on food production and distribution. The Nigerian government had removed fuel subsidies as part of an economic reform program, but this decision led to immediate consequences, with food prices soaring and transportation costs skyrocketing (Otaha, 2013). The protests were largely driven by urban workers, students, and organized labor groups who were suffering from the economic hardship caused by the price hikes. The Nigerian government eventually reversed its decision to remove fuel subsidies after the protests grew in scale and intensity. These riots revealed the government's vulnerability to popular unrest and underscored the role of food price volatility in triggering social movements in Africa.

In Sudan, food insecurity was one of the driving factors behind the 2019 revolution that ousted President Omar al-Bashir (El-Ghobashy, 2019). Thousands of citizens were heavily affected by food scarcity. The Sudanese government's inability to address these economic challenges led to widespread protests, which were initially sparked by bread shortages. The protests led to the military's intervention and al-Bashir's eventual removal from office. As in Tunisia, the protests grew from a demand for affordable food to a broader demand for political change (Abdel-Latif, 2020).

2.4 Historical Trajectories of Food Riots and Social Unrest (1970–2024)

The period from 1970 to 2024 in Africa and the Middle East has been punctuated by numerous instances of food riots and broader social unrest, often directly linked to food price volatility, supply shortages, and underlying socio-economic grievances. These events serve as critical markers in understanding the evolving relationship between food security and political stability in these regions.

Table 1 provides a chronological overview of major food-related protests and their immediate contexts.

Table 1
Chronology of Major Food Riots and Food-Related Protests in Africa and the Middle East (1970-2024)

Year(s)	Country/Region	Event Name/Description	Primary Trigger(s)	Key Outcome/Significance
1972-1975	Sahel Region (Africa)	Global Food Crisis	Severe drought, international agricultural policies (subsidized non-growth of grain)	~2 million deaths, UN World Hunger Conference (focus on long-term policy)
1977	Egypt	Egyptian Bread Riots	IMF-mandated termination of state subsidies on basic foodstuffs	Widespread protests in major cities, army deployment, subsidies reinstated, ~80 killed, ~550 injured, ~1200 arrested
1981	Morocco	1981 Moroccan Riots (Casablanca bread riots)	Price increases in basic food supplies (flour, sugar, oil, milk, butter)	General strike, violent suppression, official death toll 66 (opposition claimed 637), shift in urban governance strategies

Year(s)	Country/ Region	Event Name/ Description	Primary Trigger(s)	Key Outcome/Significance
1983-1984	Tunisia	Tunisian Bread Riots	IMF-imposed austerity program, 100%+ rise in bread/flour prices	Violent demonstrations, over 100 deaths, weakened regime, set stage for 1987 coup
1984	Egypt	Kfar el-Dewar industrial area riots	Food price hikes	Government rolled back prices
1987	Lebanon	Beirut Food Protests	Record fall of Lebanese pound, high import dependence, soaring prices	Protests spread, “We’re hungry! We want to eat!” chants
1989	Jordan	“Habbat Nissan” Riots	Default on IMF debt, 10-15% price increases (food, fuel)	Unrest spread from Ma’an, casualties (at least 4 civilians, 1 soldier killed)
1989	Nigeria	Anti-SAP Riots	Effects of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), increased petrol and food prices	Violent student-led protests, widespread destruction of state property, 13 universities closed
1980s-1990s	Zambia	Food Riots and Economic Depression	Deepening economic depression, rising unemployment, food scarcity	Autocracy crumbled, 30 deaths in June 1990 food riots
1980s-1990s	Sudan	Civil War and Hunger	Use of hunger as a weapon, government obstruction of relief, tripling of bread prices	Widespread famine deaths, displacement, protracted conflict
1996	Jordan	Karak Bread Riots	Lifting of wheat subsidies, bread prices doubled	Protests, army occupation, strict curfew, ~200 arrests
2007-2008	Multiple African & Middle Eastern Countries	Global Food Price Crisis Riots	Sharp escalation in international commodity prices (wheat up 130%)	Widespread riots in 14+ African countries, linked to poverty, political dissatisfaction, social media mobilization
2007-2008	Morocco	“Bread Riots”	Global food price spikes, dependency on imports, agricultural policy shifts	Recurrent protests reported as “bread riots”
2008	Yemen	Food Insecurity Riots	Global food price spikes, import dependence	Food insecurity crisis, leading to riots
2010	Mozambique	Food Riots	Spiraling food inflation (30% bread price increase), unemployment, water/energy price hikes	Deadly mass demonstrations, police violence, 13 killed, policy reversal (bread prices decreased)
2010-2011	Tunisia	Arab Spring (initial trigger)	Corruption, economic stagnation, self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi	Overthrow of President Ben Ali, widespread protests across MENA
2011	Egypt	Arab Spring Protests	Economic grievances, rising commodity prices, food insecurity, political dissatisfaction	Mass protests (Tahrir Square), overthrow of President Mubarak, political turnovers
2011	Algeria	Protests over unemployment and food prices	Unemployment, rising food prices	Government reduced food prices, small protests continued
2011	Syria	Syrian Civil War (initial protests)	Extreme drought (2006-2011), economic hardship, social frustrations	Escalation to full-blown civil war, widespread displacement, hunger
2016-Present	Yemen	Famine and Food Insecurity Crisis	Ongoing civil war, Saudi-led blockade, destruction of infrastructure	17.4 million struggling with food insecurity (2022), widespread malnutrition, cholera outbreaks
2019-Present	Lebanon	Economic Collapse & Food Crisis	Economic collapse, hyperinflation, lifting of food subsidies, Beirut port explosion	Severe food insecurity (1.29M Lebanese, 700K Syrian refugees by Dec 2022), reliance on aid
2020-2024	Horn of Africa	Acute Hunger Crisis	Severe drought, conflict, COVID-19 pandemic, rising food prices (Ukraine war)	37 million people facing worst hunger crisis in 70 years (2023), widespread food insecurity
2021-2024	Tunisia	Food Shortages Crisis	Shortages of flour, sugar, milk, rice, coffee	Did not result in widespread social unrest due to local coping strategies and moral economy of supply
2022	Iraq	Food Protests	Spiraling food prices (Ukraine war impact), flour price increase	Protests in Nasiriyah, temporary suspension of customs charges on goods
2024	Nigeria	“End Bad Governance” Protests	Rising cost of living, economic hardship, fuel subsidy removal	Violent protests, police clashes, curfews, arrests
2024	Kenya	Anti-Tax Protests	Proposed tax increases (including on bread, cooking oil)	Storming of Parliament, police violence, 19 deaths, bill vetoed

Source: Authors’ Compilation, 2025

2.5 The 1970s: Early Crises and the Genesis of Food-Related Protests

The 1970s marked a significant period for global food security, setting precedents for future crises and the

emergence of food-related social unrest. The Global Food Crisis of 1972-1975 was a devastating event, resulting in an estimated 2 million deaths worldwide (Brown, 1974). This famine originated with a severe drought in the

Sahel Region of Africa, but its impact was significantly exacerbated by international economic and political policies. For instance, agricultural policies enacted by major grain-exporting countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia in the early 1970s intentionally subsidized farmers to reduce grain production, aiming to drive up global prices (Patel, 2007). This policy, combined with the Sahelian drought and a strong El Niño event in 1972, created a severe global food shortage that disproportionately affected vulnerable regions, including the Sahel, Bangladesh, India, and the Soviet Union. Despite millions facing starvation, capitalist industrial nations experienced an economic boom as grain prices soared. The international community's response, epitomized by the 1974 UN World Hunger Conference in Rome, focused on long-term policy and "self-help" rather than immediate emergency food aid, providing only "paltry amounts of seed, fertilizer, and pesticides" to starving nations (Patel, 2007). This approach, largely ineffective in addressing the immediate crisis, highlighted a critical disconnect in international humanitarian efforts. Global food insecurity led to food related riots across Africa and the Middle East that had earlier suffered near socio-economic collapse. The immediate trigger was the termination of state subsidies on basic foodstuffs, a measure mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (AbdelRazik, 1978).

2.6 The 1980s and 1990s: Structural Adjustment Programs and Widespread Discontent

The 1980s and 1990s in Africa and the Middle East were largely defined by the widespread implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The neoliberal reforms compelled governments to drastically cut public services, privatize state assets, remove labor market regulations, and eliminate subsidies on essential goods, including food (Watts, 1994). While proponents argued these reforms were necessary for macroeconomic stabilization, critics contended that SAPs paid insufficient attention to the social dimensions of development and the institutional weaknesses of developing countries (Mkandawire, 2005). The consequences were severe: Africa's per capita GDP declined, poverty increased, and human development outcomes deteriorated, leading to a recession that lasted over two decades in some areas (Mkandawire, 2005). These austerity measures frequently served as a direct catalyst for widespread social unrest and food riots across the regions.

The Tunisian Bread Riots of December 1983-January 1984 exemplify this direct link. Triggered by an IMF-imposed austerity program that led to an immediate and dramatic rise of over 100% in bread and flour prices, these violent demonstrations resulted in over 100 deaths (Ayeb and Bush, 2019). For many poor Tunisian families,

who spent up to 80% of their food budget on bread and semolina, the price hike was devastating. The protests, which began in impoverished southern regions and spread to major cities like Tunis and Sfax, were not merely about food but symbolized opposition to neoliberal economic policies (Ayeb and Bush, 2019).

Similar patterns unfolded across the region. For instance, Morocco experienced the 1981 Moroccan Riots, also known as the "Casablanca bread riots" or "Hunger Revolts," driven by sharp price increases in basic food supplies (flour, sugar, oil, milk, butter). A general strike escalated into widespread destruction of property, met with violent suppression that resulted in hundreds of casualties (Entelis, 1989). A second wave of "IMF riots" occurred in 1984, primarily in northern cities. In Egypt, further food-related unrest occurred in 1984 in the Kfar el-Dewar industrial area outside Alexandria, prompting the government to roll back food price hikes (Ayeb and Bush, 2019). Lebanon saw food protests erupt in 1987 in Beirut and other towns, with marchers chanting "We're hungry! We want to eat!" These protests coincided with a dramatic fall in the value of the Lebanese pound, highlighting the country's high dependence on food imports (Ayeb and Bush, 2019).

Jordan faced the "habbat nissan" (Squalls of April) riots in 1989 after defaulting on IMF debt and introducing 10-15% price increases. The unrest, which began in Ma'an and spread to other southern cities, resulted in multiple casualties (Massad, 2001). Another significant protest occurred in 1996 in Karak when the government lifted wheat subsidies, doubling bread prices and leading to riots, army deployment, and arrests (Massad, 2001).

Nigeria experienced the 1989 Anti-SAP riots, student-led anti-government protests triggered by increased petrol and food prices. These protests, which included widespread destruction of state-owned property, led to the closure of 13 universities and were met with a harsh government response, though the SAP measures were not immediately reversed (Bangura, 1991).

In Zambia, the 1980s saw a deepening economic depression, leading to food riots and rising unemployment that contributed to the crumbling of the autocratic regime. Food riots in June 1990 resulted in approximately 30 deaths, further pressuring the government towards multi-party elections (Burnell, 2001).

These decades clearly illustrate how externally imposed austerity measures and domestic economic policies, particularly those affecting staple food prices, directly fueled social unrest. The protests were often met with violent state repression, but in many cases, they compelled policy reversals or contributed to the weakening of authoritarian regimes. The protests were rarely solely about food; they were deeply intertwined with broader anti-government sentiments, challenging the legitimacy of rulers perceived as failing to protect their citizens' basic welfare.

2.7 The 2000s: Global Food Price Spikes and the Precursors to Regional Upeavals

The 2000s witnessed a renewed surge in global food prices, culminating in the 2007-2008 world food price crisis, which had profound implications for social stability in Africa and the Middle East. This crisis was characterized by a sharp escalation in international commodity prices, with wheat prices, for instance, rising by an astonishing 130% in the first three months of 2008 alone (Bellemare, 2015). This placed immense pressure on already vulnerable populations and triggered widespread riots and protests in numerous African and Middle Eastern countries.

Studies of these events revealed that while rising food prices were a direct and significant trigger, the unrest was driven by a complex interplay of multiple factors (Haggard and Hendrix, 2015). The increasing availability of social media also facilitated the rapid mobilization of protestors, accelerating the spread and intensity of the unrest (Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam, 2011). For example, Morocco, Nigeria and Yemen experienced recurrent protests in 2007-2008. The events of the 2000s underscore a critical pattern of global food price shocks. These shocks acted as a powerful catalyst and weapons for political discontent particularly in fragile states.

2.8 The 2010s: The Arab Spring and its Enduring Legacy

The early 2010s were profoundly shaped by the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that swept across much of the Arab world. While political factors and demands for democracy quickly took center stage, rising food prices played a significant role in fomenting the initial unrest, often acting as a critical accelerant to pre-existing social tensions (Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam, 2011). The economic hardships, including rising commodity prices and pervasive food insecurity, hit the most vulnerable populations with particular force. Key events during this period illustrating the intersection include Mass protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt in 2011. The protests led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, signaling a wave of political turnovers across the region. Still in the same year, protests erupted over unemployment and food prices in Algeria. Protest also erupted in Syria and escalated into the Syrian Civil War (Kelley, Mohtadi, and Cane, 2015). Prior to the main wave of the Arab Spring, Mozambique experienced deadly food riots and mass demonstrations in September 2010. These were sparked by spiraling food inflation, notably a 30% increase in bread prices, compounded by high unemployment and increases in water and energy costs resulting to several deaths (Ayeb and Bush, 2019). The legacy of this period continues to shape the socio-political landscape of Africa and the Middle East, with many conflicts and crises still ongoing, directly or indirectly stemming from these initial upheavals.

2.9 The 2020s: New Shocks and Persistent Food Insecurity Challenges

The early 2020s have seen a continuation and, in some cases, an exacerbation of food insecurity challenges across Africa and the Middle East, driven by a new confluence of global shocks and persistent vulnerabilities. In 2023, the global food security and nutrition situation remained dire, with one in five people in Africa facing hunger (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023). Key developments and events include protest in the Horn of Africa (2020-2024). This sub-region has faced one of the worst food crises in 70 years, with 37 million people experiencing acute hunger in 2023 due to an interplay of prolonged drought, COVID-19 pandemic, global food crises, particularly the war in Ukraine (World Food Programme, 2023). Tunisia between 2021 to 2024 faced severe food related riots in addition to that experienced in Nigeria in the same period. The “End Bad Governance” protests in August 2024 were triggered by the rising cost of living, economic hardship, and the removal of fuel subsidies. These demonstrations, initially peaceful, escalated into violence following attempts by security agencies to quell them, resulting in clashes, curfews, and arrests across multiple states (Otaha, 2013). In June 2024, thousands of protestors stormed the Kenyan Parliament Building in Nairobi in response to proposed tax increases, which initially included a 16% sales tax on bread and a 25% duty on cooking oil. Although these specific food-related tax proposals were dropped due to public opposition, the broader protests escalated into violence, with police opening fire on demonstrators, resulting in more than 19 deaths (Amnesty International, 2024). Food protests also erupted in March 2022 in Iraq against spiraling prices, significantly impacted by the war in Ukraine. The price of flour, a staple, increased by nearly a third, leading to shortages and public demonstrations in cities like Nasiriyah (United Nations, 2022). The government responded by temporarily suspending customs charges on consumer goods and food products to stabilize prices.

Yemen continues to grapple with an ongoing and severe food insecurity crisis, primarily driven by the protracted civil war and a Saudi-led blockade. By 2022, an estimated 17.4 million Yemenis struggled with food insecurity, with widespread malnutrition and cholera outbreaks (World Food Programme, 2022). The conflict has devastated infrastructure and supply chains, making the population highly dependent on humanitarian aid and economic depression till date.

In addition, following a profound economic collapse in 2019, Lebanon has experienced hyperinflation and the lifting of food subsidies, leading to exorbitant food prices and severe shortages. By December 2022, 1.29 million Lebanese citizens and 700,000 Syrian refugees faced severe food insecurity (United Nations, 2022). The

Beirut port explosion in 2020 and global supply chain disruptions further exacerbated the crisis, creating a wide social vulnerability among patriotic citizens.

The events of the 2020s was triggered by global food price shock, Ukraine war, COVID-19 and climate change, frequently leading to protests and violence.

3. INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND POLICY RESPONSES TO FOOD CRISES

Governments and international bodies have implemented

a range of policies to address food crises, with varying degrees of success. These responses typically fall into categories such as national-level interventions (subsidies, price controls, strategic reserves) and the involvement of international financial institutions and development aid (Hickey, 2019)]. The effectiveness of these measures is often contingent on their design, implementation, and the broader socio-political context.

Table 5 provides a typology of these responses, assessing their observed effectiveness and inherent challenges.

Table 5
Typology of Government and International Responses to Food Crises: Effectiveness and Challenges

Type of Response	Key Characteristics	Observed Effectiveness	Challenges/Limitations
National-Level Interventions			
Food Subsidies & Price Controls	Government provision of basic foods at low prices; fixing market prices.	Short-term relief, can prevent immediate unrest (e.g., Egypt 1977).	Financially unsustainable, benefit wealthy as much as poor, distort markets, disincentivize domestic production, politically sensitive to remove.
Strategic Food Reserves	Stockpiling essential food grains to release during price spikes.	Effective in stabilizing domestic prices if reserves are adequate and targets high; counter-cyclical; can smooth global prices for large importing regions (MENA).	Costly, requires significant investment and management, more expensive than targeted interventions.
Export Restrictions / Import Duty Cuts	Banning/limiting food exports; reducing taxes/tariffs on imported food.	Can keep domestic prices artificially low (export restrictions); may stabilize domestic markets (import measures).	Reduce farmer incentives (export restrictions), not long-term solutions, can exacerbate global price volatility; minimal consumer impact if original tax rate is low.
International & Development Interventions			
Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)	IMF/World Bank policies emphasizing macroeconomic stabilization, privatization, subsidy removal, free markets.	Aimed at fiscal discipline and market liberalization.	Often led to severe social unrest (due to austerity, subsidy cuts), increased poverty, human development deterioration, insufficient attention to social/institutional weaknesses.
Humanitarian Aid & Emergency Programs	Provision of food, water, shelter, and essential items, often in conflict/crisis zones.	Saves lives, provides immediate relief, preserves human assets.	Often hampered by insufficient resources, access challenges (bureaucratic impediments, hostilities), temporary nature, does not address root causes.
Targeted Cash Transfers / Social Safety Nets	Direct monetary assistance or vouchers to vulnerable households.	More efficient than broad subsidies, protects purchasing power, allows household choice, can mitigate poverty.	Requires strong social safety nets, effective targeting mechanisms, and sufficient fiscal space; can be eroded by inflation.
Agricultural Investment & Resilience Programs	Long-term strategies to boost agricultural productivity, climate-smart farming, diversified production, rural infrastructure.	Aims to reduce import dependence, build resilience, improve livelihoods.	Requires significant investment capital, political will, and implementation capacity; results are long-term; vulnerable to conflict and climate shocks.

Source: Authors' Compilation

3.1 National-Level Interventions: Subsidies, Price Controls, and Strategic Reserves

Governments in Africa and the Middle East have historically employed a range of national-level interventions to manage food crises. These often include instituting food subsidies, imposing price controls, restricting exports, cutting import duties, and, more recently, increasing cash transfers to vulnerable populations.

Food subsidies and price controls are frequently adopted as immediate measures to dampen the impact of international price spikes on domestic markets and to lessen the burden on vulnerable groups. While these policies can provide short-term relief and prevent immediate social unrest, as seen in Egypt in 1977 (AbdelRazik, 1978), they often prove to be financially unsustainable in the long run, particularly as government

revenues dwindle. Furthermore, broad-based subsidies tend to benefit the wealthy as much as the poor, leading to inefficient resource allocation and market distortions. Their removal, often pressured by foreign donors due to financial unsustainability, carries significant political risk and can lead to delegitimization and widespread protests, as demonstrated by numerous historical events across the region (Ayeb and Bush, 2019).

Strategic food reserves, involving the stockpiling of essential food grains, represent another intervention aimed at enhancing food security by releasing supplies during price spikes to stabilize domestic markets. This strategy can be effective if the target price is set appropriately high and reserves are adequate, acting as a counter-cyclical measure that can even help smooth global prices if the importing region is sufficiently large, as is the case for the MENA region (Arezki and Brückner, 2011). Egypt, for instance, has invested in expanding its strategic grain storage capacity to reduce waste and ensure wheat availability, thereby enhancing its resilience against shocks. However, maintaining strategic reserves is a costly undertaking, often more expensive than targeted interventions like cash transfers.

Other trade-related measures, such as export restrictions or the reduction of import duties, have also been employed. Export restrictions aim to keep domestic prices artificially low but can inadvertently reduce incentives for local farmers to produce more food and are not sustainable long-term solutions, as people often find ways to bypass them. Conversely, while removing taxes or tariffs on imported food can reduce domestic prices and stabilize markets, their impact on consumers may be minimal if the original tax rate was low relative to the overall price increase.

The outcomes of subsidy reforms have varied significantly based on the specific strategies adopted by governments. Morocco, for (The text ends here, but in a complete document, the sentence would be finished).

3.2 The Role of International Financial Institutions and Development Aid

International financial institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF and World Bank have played a significant, albeit often controversial, role in shaping policy responses to economic and food crises in Africa and the Middle East. During the 1980s and 1990s, the widespread implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), championed by these institutions, emphasized macroeconomic stabilization, privatization, and free market development. These programs often mandated deep cuts in public spending, including the removal of food subsidies, which critics argued paid insufficient attention to the social dimensions of development and the institutional weaknesses of developing countries (17). The imposition of SAPs frequently led to widespread

social unrest, as austerity measures directly impacted the livelihoods of ordinary citizens, contributing to increased poverty and human development deterioration. This period demonstrated the profound political implications of economic reforms dictated by external actors, often exacerbating existing social tensions.

Beyond structural adjustment, international development aid and humanitarian assistance are crucial components of the global response to food crises. However, the effectiveness of this aid is frequently hampered by significant challenges, including insufficient resources, bureaucratic impediments, and access issues in conflict-affected areas. The Horn of Africa, for instance, has seen humanitarian aid hampered by these very barriers, despite 37 million people facing severe hunger (24).

In more recent years, institutions like the World Bank have scaled up their engagement, committing substantial financing for emergency programs and long-term food and nutrition security initiatives. For example, the World Bank has provided nearly a billion dollars for emergency food security programs in the MENA region, focusing on building resilient agriculture, climate-smart farming, reforming subsidy systems, improving water management, and fostering agribusiness development (27). Globally, the World Bank has made \$45 billion available for food and nutrition security, with significant allocations to West, Central, and East Africa. These efforts increasingly aim to support food production, enhance climate resilience, and facilitate trade, while also strengthening social protection programs to help vulnerable households cope with high food prices.

UNICEF, among other organizations, has also called on governments and international partners to address the availability, access, and affordability of safe and nutritious foods, and to promote social protection schemes, particularly for vulnerable families and children. This emphasis on social safety nets and targeted support, such as cash transfers, reflects a shift away from the broad, often distortive, subsidies of the past, recognizing them as a more cost-effective way to alleviate the burden on vulnerable households.

The experience of international interventions reveals a mixed record. While SAPs often exacerbated social unrest due to their austerity measures, contemporary aid efforts increasingly focus on building resilience and strengthening social protection. However, these efforts still face significant implementation barriers, particularly in regions plagued by conflict and weak governance. The evolving approach highlights a recognition that effective international assistance must move beyond short-term fixes to address the underlying structural causes of food insecurity, while also adapting to the complex realities of fragile states and prioritizing targeted support mechanisms.

3.3 Developmental Issues and Long-Term Impacts

The intersection of food riots and social unrest in Africa and the Middle East is deeply intertwined with a range of persistent developmental issues, leading to significant and often long-lasting socio-economic and human development consequences. These issues not only exacerbate food insecurity but also perpetuate cycles of instability, hindering sustainable development.

The socio-economic landscape of Africa and the Middle East is characterized by deep-seated structural problems that render populations highly vulnerable to food crises and subsequent unrest. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the middle class faces heightened economic vulnerability due to failing social protection systems and an emphasis on selective subsidies (18,23).

Unemployment, particularly among youth, remains a critical challenge across Africa and the Middle East, with levels being among the highest globally. This demographic pressure, combined with economies specialized in sectors that generate low employment growth and a lack of structural transformation towards high-productive industries, creates a significant burden (12). The high wages in commodity-exporting sectors can inflate labor costs across the board, hindering job creation in more employment-intensive industries. Majority of populace with low income cannot afford quality meal even when food riots do not occur. Furthermore, poor and limited infrastructure, such as costly and unreliable electricity and water supplies, dampens investment opportunities in the food sector. The education systems in the region often fail to equip graduates with the necessary skills for productive jobs, particularly in innovative food production leading to high rates of educated graduates in agricultural sector with little practical knowledge of food production and processing.

By implications, food price increases directly translate into higher inflation, which erodes household real incomes, particularly for the poor who spend a larger share of their income on food. For food-importing countries, high food prices can also result in adverse terms of trade shocks, leading to lower economic growth and reduced government fiscal space (28,30). These economic pressures, including the inability of many African households to afford essential goods, cultivate feelings of anger, vicious circle and working for survival.

The long-term impacts of food crises and social unrest extend profoundly into human development, particularly affecting health, nutritional status of population, and educational outcome in children thereby perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment. Food insecurity directly compromises dietary quality, leading to restricted dietary diversity, reduced meal frequency and portion sizes, and widespread micronutrient deficiencies (15,18). This has

severe consequences for public health, especially among vulnerable populations.

Conflict-affected countries within the region, such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Sudan, exhibit particularly high rates of childhood stunting and wasting, indicating chronic and acute malnutrition (22). The immediate effects of food insecurity can be a devastating loss of life, but even temporary increases in food prices can inflict long-term, irreversible damage, especially on children (25).

3.4 Theoretical Clarification: Class Struggle Theory in the Explanation of Food Riots and Social Reform

Class Struggle Theory, a central tenet of Marxist thought, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding societal conflicts, particularly those related to economic inequality and exploitation. This theory, primarily articulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, posits that society is divided into two main classes: the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) who own the means of production, and the proletariat (working class) who sell their labor in exchange for wages. According to Marx, history is a history of class struggles, where these two classes are in constant conflict due to their opposing economic interests. The application of this theory to food riots offers a unique perspective on how economic inequality, particularly within capitalist societies, leads to social unrest and, in some cases, significant social reform.

Marx's key ideas, which underpin the theory of class struggle, include the following tenets:

i. Historical Materialism: Marx believed that the economic base (the mode of production) shapes the superstructure of society (politics, culture, law, etc.). The way goods and services are produced determines the social relations of society, including class structure.

ii. Class Division: In capitalist societies, there are two main classes: the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production, such as factories, land, and capital) and the proletariat (the working class, who sell their labor in exchange for wages). The bourgeoisie's goal is to maximize profits, often at the expense of the working class.

iii. Exploitation and Alienation: The working class is exploited because they produce more value (through their labor) than they receive in wages. This leads to alienation—workers become disconnected from the products of their labor, from each other, and from their own human potential.

iv. Inherent Conflict: Marx argued that the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are inherently opposed. This conflict is the driving force of social change. According to Marx, the contradictions within capitalism will eventually lead to a revolutionary transformation in which the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie and establishes a classless, communist society.

v. Revolutionary Change: Marx believed that social change occurs through class struggle. The tensions and contradictions between the ruling and working classes inevitably lead to a revolution, which would result in the establishment of socialism and, ultimately, communism.

Food riots are often seen as one of the more direct manifestations of class struggle, as they highlight the deep socio-economic inequalities and the exploitation of the working class (27). Food riots generally occur during periods of economic hardship, particularly when food prices rise sharply or when there are shortages. These events are not merely about hunger but also reflect broader grievances about the distribution of wealth and resources in society.

Food riots typically occur in situations where the working class experiences food insecurity—either through rising food prices, scarcity of food, or both (32). In capitalist societies, food production and distribution are controlled by a few large corporations or wealthy landowners, while the working class, which produces the food, struggles to afford it. This discrepancy in the distribution of resources is a classic example of exploitation under capitalism, as the working class (proletariat) bears the brunt of economic inequality. The bourgeoisie, who control food prices and distribution, are able to maximize their profits, often at the expense of the people who need food the most. The resulting social unrest, expressed through food riots, highlights the anger and frustration of the proletariat.

The French Revolution (1789) provides a clear example of Class Struggle Theory in the context of food riots (29). In the years leading up to the revolution, France experienced a series of poor harvests, which led to widespread food shortages and skyrocketing bread prices. The working class, especially in Paris, struggled to afford food, while the aristocracy and bourgeoisie continued to live in luxury. The economic hardship faced by the working classes was compounded by a feudal system that disproportionately burdened them with taxes, while the monarchy and aristocracy enjoyed privilege and wealth. As the tensions between the classes grew, food riots became a key feature of the revolutionary period. The riots were not just about food; they symbolized a broader class conflict in which the proletariat sought to overthrow a system that had long oppressed them. The eventual fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the French Republic were direct outcomes of these tensions, and revolutionary reforms aimed at redistributing power and resources followed.

In 19th-century England, food riots were common during times of economic distress, especially in relation to the Corn Laws (1815–1846). These laws imposed tariffs on imported grain, which kept the price of bread high and exacerbated food scarcity. The Corn Laws disproportionately benefited the land-owning class

(the bourgeoisie) at the expense of the urban working class (the proletariat), who spent a large portion of their wages on food (33). As food prices soared, the working class protested through food riots and other forms of resistance. These riots were not just about food; they were a manifestation of a broader struggle between the aristocracy and the industrial working class. The economic grievances of the working class eventually led to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, a significant victory for the industrial bourgeoisie and the working class. This repeal represented a shift in the political and economic landscape, reflecting the growing power of industrial capitalism over agrarian interests.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was another significant example of how food riots and social unrest are rooted in class struggle (34). During World War I, Russia faced extreme food shortages due to a combination of military requisitions, poor harvests, and economic mismanagement. The working class and peasants, who were already suffering from the harsh conditions of Tsarist rule, were further alienated by the scarcity of food. In early 1917, food riots erupted in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), where workers and soldiers, many of whom were part of the proletariat, confronted the government about the food crisis and demanded better living conditions. These riots, driven by the class struggle between the oppressed working class and the Tsarist autocracy, were part of a broader wave of discontent that led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the establishment of a provisional government. However, this government failed to address the demands of the workers and peasants, leading to the October Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, seized power. The Bolshevik government promised land reforms and workers' control of industry, and in the aftermath, the state implemented policies aimed at addressing the food crisis and redistributing wealth to the working class.

Class Struggle Theory also provides insight into how food riots can lead to social reform. When the proletariat rises up against the economic system, particularly over issues like food insecurity, the ruling classes often respond with reforms to quell unrest and restore social order. These reforms, while sometimes limited in scope, can address the immediate demands of the working class and lead to broader changes in society.

In response to food riots, governments may implement reforms to improve food security and address the economic disparities that led to unrest. For example, following the food riots in France during the Revolution, the revolutionary government introduced price controls and nationalized grain distribution systems to ensure that the working class had access to affordable food. In modern times, food riots have often led to the creation of social safety nets, including food assistance programs and subsidies for essential goods.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on Historical Case Study Analysis and Documentary Research to interpret the complex, non-linear relationship between food insecurity and social unrest in Africa and the Middle East from 1970 to 2024. The fundamental aim is not to measure correlation but to understand the “why” and “how”—the underlying socio-political meanings, institutional failures, and behavioral patterns that transform food price spikes into political challenges, framing food as a deeply political commodity. This interpretive approach is guided by the “moral economy” concept which posits that protests are driven by the perceived breach of an implicit social contract where the state fails in its duty to ensure basic subsistence.

Data collection relies exclusively on secondary sources, utilizing a comprehensive Documentary Research method. The sources are triangulated across three key categories to ensure rich, context-specific interpretation: 1) Academic Literature (peer-reviewed articles, books, and monographs) to establish theoretical frameworks and interpretive narratives on food riots and state legitimacy; 2) Institutional Reports and Working Papers from organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and UN agencies (FAO, WFP) to provide context on policy shifts like Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and macroeconomic factors; and 3) Historical Accounts and reputable analyses that detail the immediate triggers, sequence of events, and specific government and protester actions during major historical cases (e.g., the 1977 Egyptian Bread Riots, the Tunisian Revolution). This approach allows for a deep, historical comparison of multiple cases over a five-decade period.

The analysis employs Qualitative Content and Thematic Analysis. Data analysis proceeded by systematically reviewing and coding the documented events and narratives. Qualitative Content Analysis focused on identifying specific causal factors (catalysts) for unrest (e.g., subsidy removal, harvest failure, or corruption), key actors (low-income urban populations, students, organized labor), and specific consequences (policy reversal, regime change, state repression). This information was then synthesized using Thematic Analysis to construct overarching interpretive themes, such as the “Structural Adjustment Legacy” (interpreting riots as a reaction to neoliberal austerity measures and “Food Insecurity as a Barometer of State Legitimacy”). This interpretive synthesis allows the study to move beyond descriptive cataloging of riots to a deeper understanding of food’s critical role in challenging political power in the studied regions.

The study’s strength lies in its historical depth and multi-case comparison across diverse African and Middle Eastern states, enhancing the transferability of its structural findings regarding political fragility. However, the exclusive reliance on secondary documentation is a

methodological limitation. The research cannot capture primary qualitative data—the direct experiences, emotional states, or immediate, unmediated motivations of the participants in the food riots. This limitation is mitigated by the explicit focus on the macro-level political and institutional interpretation of collective action, grounded in established historical and political economy frameworks.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis confirms that food insecurity acts as a critical political accelerant throughout the 1970–2024 period, consistently linking economic distress to challenges to state legitimacy in Africa and the Middle East. Food riots are not simple responses to hunger but are “performative acts” demonstrating a societal rejection of the state’s failure to uphold the “moral economy”—the implicit contract to ensure basic sustenance. The results, grouped by crisis period, show that while the proximate causes of unrest shift (from policy-driven subsidy cuts to global price shocks), the underlying vulnerability of the poor remains the constant ignition point.

The study revealed that the period between 1970s and 1990s, externally imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) directly catalyzed social unrest by compelling governments to remove subsidies. Notable cases like the 1977 Egyptian Bread Riots and the deadly 1983–1984 Tunisian Bread Riots were triggered by sudden, dramatic price hikes (e.g., over 100% in Tunisia). The protests were highly effective in this era, often forcing policy reversals (Egypt) or significantly contributing to the weakening of authoritarian regimes (Zambia, Nigeria). This demonstrates that the removal of food security safety nets is a direct challenge to political stability, even in repressive states.

The 2000s and 2010s showed that global commodity price spikes, such as the 130% rise in wheat prices during the 2007–2008 crisis. The most profound outcome was the role of food prices as a tipping point for systemic political upheaval. The economic hardship caused by rising food and fuel costs was a major accelerant for the Arab Spring, linking localized desperation (like the vendor in Tunisia) to mass protests that demanded regime change in Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan (2019). This shift confirmed that food prices, when combined with chronic high unemployment and corruption, transform into a powerful weapon for social reform.

The most recent period is defined by multiple, intersecting global shocks (COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and climate change), leading to both chronic humanitarian crises (e.g., 37 million facing acute hunger in the Horn of Africa) and acute political protests. The analysis confirms a persistent, acute political sensitivity to food taxes and costs across the region. Recent events, such as the violent protests in Kenya (2024) over proposed taxes on bread and

cooking oil and protests from EndSars, and fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria (2024), underscore that governments still risk immediate, destabilizing unrest when attempting to alter the cost of basic staples, regardless of global context. While conflict areas like Yemen, Lebanon persistently wallows in food crisis, humanitarian aids have been incapacitated due to escalation of food insecurity across the entire region and the proliferation of conflict-ridden zones including Palestine-Israel, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran and the Horns of Africa.

5. 1 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This comprehensive review of food riots and social unrest in Africa and the Middle East from 1970 to 2024 reveals a deeply entrenched and evolving relationship between food security, political stability, institutional effectiveness, and developmental progress. Food riots are far more than spontaneous acts of desperation; they are often performative challenges to state legitimacy, deeply embedded within broader social movements and intertwined with a complex array of grievances beyond mere hunger. The historical trajectory demonstrates a recurring pattern where global food price shocks, often exacerbated by climate change and domestic policy choices, act as critical catalysts, igniting pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, governance failures, and political discontent.

The analysis highlights a dangerous circularity: rising food prices can directly trigger unrest, while unrest, in turn, disrupts food production and supply chains, further driving up prices. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in low-income countries with fragile political institutions, where the capacity to absorb shocks and respond effectively to public grievances is limited. The era of Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s and 1990s vividly illustrated how externally imposed austerity measures, particularly the removal of food subsidies, directly fueled widespread unrest and challenged state authority. More recently, events like the Arab Spring underscored how food insecurity, alongside issues of corruption, unemployment, and authoritarianism, could converge to produce region-wide upheavals.

The long-term consequences of this intersection are severe and multi-dimensional. They manifest as persistent poverty, widening inequality, and high unemployment, especially among youth, stemming from undiversified economies and inadequate infrastructure. Human development outcomes are profoundly impacted, with food insecurity leading to malnutrition, long-term health detriments, and compromised educational attainment, particularly for children. Furthermore, the forced displacement of populations due to conflict and hunger strains social cohesion, fostering tensions between host and displaced communities.

Addressing the complex interplay of food riots, social unrest, institutional reform, and developmental issues

in Africa and the Middle East requires a multi-faceted, comprehensive, and long-term strategic approach that moves beyond reactive crisis management to proactive resilience building.

- **Prioritize Targeted Social Protection:** Broad-based food subsidies, while offering short-term relief, are often financially unsustainable and inefficient. Policy efforts should shift towards targeted support mechanisms, such as cash transfers or food vouchers, which are more cost-effective and empower vulnerable households to meet their specific food needs. This requires strengthening social safety nets and developing robust, transparent targeting systems.

- **Invest in Climate-Resilient and Diversified Agriculture:** Given the increasing impact of climate change as a “risk multiplier,” significant investment is needed in climate-smart agriculture practices, diversified food production systems, and improved rural infrastructure. This will reduce import dependence, enhance domestic food availability, and build resilience against environmental shocks.

- **Strengthen Governance and Accountability:** Food insecurity and unrest are often symptoms of deeper governance failures. For resource-rich but unstable states, reforms must focus on enhancing institutional capacity, promoting transparency, combating corruption, and improving the quality and accessibility of public services, including health and education. Accountable governance can foster trust and legitimacy, crucial for managing public discontent. On the other hand, in institutionally stable states like Morocco, Namibia and Botswana, economic diversification and sustainable leadership should be strengthened in a bid to ensure continued regional development.

- **Address Structural Economic Issues:** Long-term stability requires fundamental economic transformation. Policies should aim to diversify economies beyond commodity dependence, foster structural transformation towards high-productive industries, and create formal sector jobs, particularly for the burgeoning youth population.

- **Enhance Strategic Food Reserves and Regional Cooperation:** While costly, adequately managed strategic food reserves can serve as a vital buffer against price volatility and supply disruptions, especially in import-dependent regions like the Middle East. Regional cooperation on food trade, storage, and early warning systems can further enhance collective food security.

- **Integrate Humanitarian and Development Aid:** International assistance must bridge the divide between short-term humanitarian relief and long-term development. Aid modalities should focus on building community resilience, fostering social cohesion, and supporting local coping mechanisms, recognizing that these contribute to peace and stability.

• **Leverage Data for Informed Policy:** The complexity of these interlinked crises necessitates robust data collection and analysis to guide effective decision-making and monitor the impact of interventions. Utilizing tools like FAOSTAT, World Bank DataBank, ACLED, and UCDP can provide critical insights into food prices, conflict events, and development indicators.

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