

Egypt Engulfed by Militarism

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More than eight years after the 2011 uprising that toppled 30-year ruler Hosni Mubarak and six years after the military coup against Mohammed Morsi, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi tightens his grip on Egypt. The March 2018 presidential elections, described by international NGOs as “neither free nor fair,”¹ secured Sisi another term in office until 2022. A comprehensive constitutional reform in 2019 is aimed at fortifying his reign and the supreme role of the military, on a permanent basis. Therefore, the political, economic and social outlook of Egypt is clouded by the centralization of power in the hands of President Sisi and his omnipresent armed forces. The most populous country in the European neighbourhood is witnessing a successive encroachment of the military into all realms of the economy, politics and society – with uncertain prospects.

A President for Life and a Military above All

In late April 2019, Egypt held a referendum on a constitutional amendment that further fortifies the pow-

ers of President Sisi and the armed forces. While separation of powers was hitherto a de facto formality, the amendment transfers further competencies of the judiciary into the President's hands and moreover places the military as a custodian of democracy and constitution above politics and other state institutions. In essence, the referendum foresees the extension of the President's term, his more active role in the selection and control of the judiciary, as well as the reorganization of the legislative branch.² Facing vast criticism at home and abroad, the Sisi regime installed a National Dialogue to cover the amendments' authoritarian appearance. However, the referendum was only the illusion of a democratic deliberation process. It took place in a climate of fear, intimidation and repression of dissent, just like the presidential elections of 2018. An all-encompassing pro-referendum campaign on the Egyptian streets and media pre-determined the vote's outcome. Officially, 89% of electors voted in favour of the amendments at a turnout of 44%. However, the backdrop of empty polling stations calls into question the credibility of official statistics.³

In general, political participation and party pluralism were only temporary phenomena in Egypt up until the July 2013 coup. After Sisi's election to the Presidency in 2014 and the passing of a new parliamentary election law, Egypt's political parties have faced effective “strategies of neutralization.”⁴ The regime executes extensive control over the public sphere

¹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. *Egypt: Planned Presidential Vote Neither Free Nor Fair*. 13 February 2018. www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/13/egypt-planned-presidential-vote-neither-free-nor-fair.

² MIEHE, Luca and STEPHAN, Roll. “Three Scenarios for the Development of the Sisi Regime in Egypt.” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, Comment 2019/C18 (March 2019).

³ BARDOS, Cassia and MICHELE Dunne. “Authoritarian Math.” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 24 April 2019. https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78980?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWW1JNU9ERTJVOGt6Tm9oaylsluQiOiJnK09aNkFYklIV2F5cE4xVzQ2OXV2V.

⁴ OMAR, Yasmin. “Egypt's Constitutional Amendments: A Nail in the Coffin of Political Pluralism.” *The Tahrir Institute of Middle East Politics*, 4 April 2019. <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/egypts-constitutional-amendments-a-nail-in-the-coffin-of-political-pluralism/>.

and the managed selection of political competitors (e.g. through party bans and restricted licensing) does not offer a realistic chance of power rotation.⁵ A lacking willingness to reform, widespread corruption⁶ and excessive repression are characteristic of Sisi's military regime.

The armed forces' reach into the political realm is complemented by the extensive control over the judicial branch. Those rights guaranteed in the constitution are permanently restricted by the state of emergency, which was extended last April 2019. Egypt is facing an extensive episode of violence - both judicial and extrajudicial. The judiciary, biased and often arbitrary, issued close to 600 death sentences in 2018 alone.⁷ Simultaneously, even if on a much lower scale, the Egyptian military also stringently carried out capital punishment. A salient example was the execution of nine young Egyptians, alleged co-conspirators in the assassination of Egypt's prosecutor general Hisham Barakat in 2015, which drew sharp international criticism due to the reported use of torture during interrogations.⁸

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Arbitrary justice against *traditional* opponents of the regime, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, is complemented by extrajudicial violence that is only rarely investigated or publicized. According to a Reuters investigation,⁹ Egyptian security forces have killed more than 460 people since the middle of 2015 in gun battles - all of those in highly disputed circumstances. The continuous erosion of the security situ-

ation, with recurring flare-ups of violent episodes, reaching far into the heart of Cairo, provides grounds for President Sisi's war on terror campaign with all the necessary prerogatives for the armed forces. With most of Sinai on military lockdown, only punctual indications might serve as insights into the actual humanitarian situation. The 2015 anti-terrorism law and the 2018 social media one have further curtailed civic freedoms and suppressed the possibility of larger social mobilizations.

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Smokescreen Development in Favour of the Armed Forces

While Egypt was able to avert bankruptcy by securing a \$12-billion aid programme set up by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with the support of other national and international donors, the economic outlook is anything but promising. The short-term macroeconomic stabilization is neither intended nor designed to promote structural reforms aimed at sustainable, inclusive growth.¹⁰ Austerity measures like cuts in energy or food subsidies trigger vast socio-economic fallout. Rising costs of living burden lower income groups and aggravate hardships for most Egyptians.

The omnipresence of the Egyptian armed forces is also a fundamental obstacle to further economic development. The military is expanding its civilian

⁵ ROLL, Stephan. "Managing change: How Egypt's military leadership shaped the transformation." In *Mediterranean Politics, Special Issue Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World*, 21 (2016).

⁶ NOLL, Jessica. "Fighting Corruption or Protecting the Regime? Egypt's Administrative Control Authority." *Project of Middle East Democracy*, February 2019. https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/POMED_ACAREport_FINAL.pdf.

⁷ MADA MASR. "Report: At least 581 sentenced to death, 32 executed in Egypt in first 11 months of 2018." 25 December 2018. <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/12/25/news/u/report-at-least-581-sentenced-to-death-32-executed-in-egypt-in-first-11-months-of-2018/>.

⁸ MICHAELSON, Ruth. "Nine executed in Egypt over Hisham Barakat assassination." *The Guardian*, 20 February 2019. www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/20/egypt-executes-nine-men-convicted-hisham-barakat-assassination.

⁹ REUTERS. "Egypt kills hundreds of suspected militants in disputed gun battles." 5 April 2019. www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/egypt-killings/.

¹⁰ ROLL, Stephan. "Flash-in-the-Pan Development in Egypt?" *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comment* 2018/C31 (July 2018).

economic activities¹¹ and, counter to the government figure of 1.5%,¹² its share of the economy could have reached up to 40%.¹³ Regardless of unreliable public statistics, the lacking managerial efficacy is mirrored in Sisi's development vision for Egypt. Large-scale projects, such as the new capital or the extension of the Suez Canal, stand in stark contrast to the socio-economic needs of the young Egyptian population, the dilapidated infrastructure or the ineffective bureaucracy. While some analyses conflate relatively strong economic growth and government reports show comparatively low unemployment rates with Egypt's overall positive development, other economic indices reveal a more pessimistic picture.¹⁴ The business climate remains grim (in the World Bank's Doing Business Index Egypt ranks 120/190 in 2019); foreign direct investment is plummeting¹⁵ and remains significantly lower than during the 2006-2008 economic boom. Public debt service consumes up to 40% of the government's budget and external debt rose by 142% between March 2013 and the end of 2018. Additionally, military spending is on the rise. Egypt more than tripled its arms purchases between 2014 and 2018 compared to the 2009-2013 period, making it the world's third-largest arms importer. Sisi's development vision, therefore, comes at a high price.¹⁶

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With the termination of the IMF programme at the end of 2019, Egypt is facing myriad challenges, including but not limited to the lack of reliable and trustworthy public statistical systems, which is a central impediment to both systematic reform and investment. The armed forces' opaque approach adds only more uncertainty to the muddy waters of Egypt's economy.

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Militarization of Foreign Policy?

The extensive acquisition of foreign weaponry is not only a burden for Egypt's state budget, but might also create the necessary basis for a militarization of the country's foreign policy and prompt readiness for stronger military engagement in the region. Until today, Egypt's military involvement in regional conflicts has been largely indirect. As part and parcel of the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen war, Egypt has thus far concentrated on logistical support without being involved in direct combat. In the case of the blockade of Qatar in 2017, Egypt joined the Saudi-UAE alliance without providing direct robust military support. In Syria, Egypt's ties with Assad's national intelligence apparatus were apparent, without being militarily visible on the ground.¹⁷ Only in Libya did Egypt actively conduct limited airstrike

¹¹ REUTERS. "From war room to boardroom. Military firms flourish in Sisi's Egypt." *Reuters Investigate*, 16 May 2018. www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/egypt-economy-military/.

¹² SALEH, Heba. "When the Egyptian army means business." *Financial Times*, 15 December 2016. www.ft.com/content/49b5d19a-bff6-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354.

¹³ ALSHARIF, Asma and KNECHT, Erik. "Sisi walks fine line between Egypt's tycoons and generals." *Reuters*, 16 October 2015. www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-sisi-business-idUSKCN0SA1FZ20151016.

¹⁴ MIEHE and ROLL. "Three Scenarios... *op. cit.*"

¹⁵ MAGDY, Mirette. "China's \$20 billion new Egypt capital project talks fall through." *Bloomberg*, 16 December 2018. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-16/china-s-20-billion-new-egypt-capital-project-talks-fall-through.

¹⁶ MIEHE and ROLL. "Three Scenarios... *op. cit.*"

¹⁷ KESSLER, Oren. "Egypt Picks Sides in the Syrian War." *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2017. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-02-12/egypt-picks-sides-syrian-war.

operations with a rather symbolic character.¹⁸ In sum, the country's regional policy stands in partial contrast to European interests. Only in its mediating efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the intra-Palestinian struggle, does Egypt play a more complementary role, though largely motivated by a conflict management goal rather than a comprehensive conflict resolution.

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Against this backdrop, extensive arms imports and the to-be formalized, supreme role of the armed forces in the Constitution might prospectively run counter to the rather restricted military doctrine of the past. In neighbouring Libya, Sisi's regime sided with Khalifa Haftar and continues to undermine UN efforts to mediate between the different factions.

Uncertainty remains over the use of the imported weaponry in ongoing conflicts such as the Nile water conflict with Sudan and Ethiopia or a future intervention in Libya. The questionable role of continued and increasing arms exports from European states – Egypt

is France's biggest arms importer, amounting to 37% of its overall exports – remains virulent.¹⁹

Encroaching Militarism: Three Scenarios for Egypt's Future

In perspective, the 2020 parliamentary election will hardly make a difference to Egypt's current predicaments. The country will continue to be held hostage by the vision of the armed forces. With the constitutional amendments fortifying Sisi's grip to power, three scenarios for the future development of Egypt are conceivable, with a varying degree of probability.²⁰ Firstly, a successful "developmental dictatorship" could be materializing. However, Sisi's economic vision comes at a high cost and macroeconomic developments point to a further erosion of the socio-economic hardship of Egyptians. Secondly, a prolongation of a Mubarak 2.0 scenario is likely if Sisi manages to keep his armed forces loyal and social repression remains high. Even without making any developmental progress, Sisi's regime might be able to use its broad competencies and security apparatus, presuming international donors are ready and willing to continue supporting the regime with financial aid and avoid criticizing it. Thirdly, the scenario of Sisi failing is as abstract as it is acute. Diverse internal or external triggers might induce an abrupt destabilization of the regime – only this time it will likely be more eruptive and less peaceful.

¹⁸ DENTICE, Giuseppe. "Egypt's Security and Haftar: al-Sisi's Strategy in Libya". *ISPI*, 2 February 2017. www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/egypts-security-and-haftar-al-sisis-strategy-libya-16284.

¹⁹ SIPRI. "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018". *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2019, p.6. www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf.

²⁰ MIEHE and ROLL. "Three Scenarios... *op. cit.*