

Egypt's Struggle for Stability in a Volatile Environment

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The Egyptian regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has been built in the wake of the 30 June demonstration and 3 July overthrowing of elected President Mohammed Morsi, amid a fear of chaos. The regional situation at the time was characterized by disintegration processes in several Arab countries (Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen). Moreover, territorial disparities within Egypt were translating politically to an Islamist majority opposition – with electoral footholds in the poorest areas: Upper Egypt and the peripheries – and a Secular opposition which was particularly strong in the most developed area of the Delta. This polarization of the political arena raised the spectre of civil war, and the deterioration of the situation in the Sinai foreshadowed a possible linkage between external threats and internal dissension. This fear explains the initial support for the rise to power of then-general el-Sisi from large parts of the population. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected President of the Republic in 2014 and re-elected in 2018. In 2019, a reform of the Constitution extended his second mandate to 2024, and has opened the door for a third mandate up to 2030.

During that time, the Muslim Brotherhood has been labelled a terrorist organization and suffered a crushing repression – along with its Islamist allies, but also some parts of the secular opposition such as the 6th of April Movement –; the military has tight-

ened its grip not only on the political and administrative institutions, but also on the economy; the executive branch has enforced its control over the media, NGOs, the unions and even the judiciary; and the regime has launched a series of large-scale projects and fast-paced reforms. Despite all these changes, potential threats to stability still persist today: the regional environment is still uncertain, and social and territorial inequalities have worsened. The lack of channels for social demands creates the conditions for sudden explosions of anger. Lastly, as in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed some latent contradictions within Egyptian society.

A Still Worrisome Regional Situation

On the western border, the failure of the Egyptian-backed offensive of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army on Tripoli reinforced Ankara's position, Cairo's main rival on the regional scene. Moreover, it gave Moscow an opportunity to intervene in this conflict and to formulate a plan, alongside Cairo, in order to find a political solution to the Libyan civil war.¹ Meanwhile, the Egyptian army has been placed in a state of alert in the west, in order to show its readiness for military intervention.²

On the southern border, the hectic transition following the toppling of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has caused concern for the Egyptian government, especially at a crucial moment regarding the multilateral discussions around the issue of the Nile water and the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renais-

¹ MADA MASR. "What Comes after the Collapse of Haftar's Western Campaign?" 8 June 2020. <https://madamasr.com/en/2020/06/08/feature/politics/what-comes-after-the-collapse-of-haftars-western-campaign/>

² JAMAL, Ahmad. "Egyptian Army's State of Alert in The West: A Clear Message to Prevent Erdogan's Mercenaries from Advancing Towards Sirte," [in Arabic] *Al Arab*, 12 June 2020. <https://frama.link/-GvwYJaz>

sance Dam. In a context in which the number of Egyptian inhabitants has this year reached 100 million, access to water is becoming an increasingly pressing issue for the government. Hence, the Ethiopians' will to start filling the dam during the summer of 2020 is perceived as an existential threat by Egyptian officials. Following an Egyptian call for international mediation, the United States became involved in the dispute in November 2019, inviting Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia for discussions in Washington DC, where an agreement was reached in February. But Ethiopia and Sudan refused to sign the document, and Ethiopia has postponed new negotiations until the autumn of 2020, after it has started filling the Renaissance Dam.³

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In North Sinai, the main militant organization, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in November 2014, and took the name of *Wilayat Sinai* (Sinai Province). During the last couple of years, military defeats of ISIL in Iraq and Syria have not put an end to the insurgency in this Egyptian governorate,⁴ and *Wilayat Sinai* has recently launched a series of attacks against the Armed Forces and the Union of

Sinai Tribes, created in 2017 to coordinate the efforts of families and tribes fighting the militants.⁵

Persistent Inequalities Fuelling Discontent

The application of the 2016 agreement with the IMF – which granted Egypt a \$12-billion loan in exchange for restoring budgetary balances – has further impoverished the low-income categories of the population, due to a devaluation of the Egyptian Pound (2016), the imposition of sales taxes, and a cut in subsidies, which increased the price of commodities. The two-figure inflation of the last couple of years, though recently slowing, has been only partially compensated by an increase in wages. If these reforms have succeeded in attracting investments and increasing exports, they have also contributed to deepening inequalities. Furthermore, the unemployment rate remains high (around 10%), especially among vulnerable categories such as youth and women.

The government has implemented some policies in order to alleviate the burden on the lower classes, such as a steady customs exchange rate for “essential goods.” Regarding territorial inequalities, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly attended a celebration on 20 January 2020, in Aswan, in order to compensate thousands of Nubians for the construction of the Aswan Dams during the previous century, in application of article 236 of the 2014 Constitution.⁶ On this occasion, he referred to the development projects implemented by the government in Upper Egypt in terms of transport, energy and health infrastructure.⁷ The government has also invested \$316 million in the Sinai for the fiscal year ending on 30 June 2020,⁸ going through with the

³ MADA MASR. “Egypt, Sudan Reject Ethiopian Offer for Transitional Agreement on Mega-Dam to Allow Initial Filling in Summer,” 27 April 2020. <https://madasar.com/en/2020/04/27/news/u/egypt-sudan-reject-ethiopian-offer-for-transitional-agreement-on-mega-dam-to-allow-initial-filling-in-summer/>

⁴ THALER, David E. “Making Headway Against the Sinai Insurgency,” 12 August 2019. www.rand.org/blog/2019/08/making-headway-against-the-sinai-insurgency.html

⁵ MADA MASR. “Militants Launch Attacks on North Sinai Tribes Following Renewed Call to Mobilize alongside Armed Forces,” 10 June 2020. <https://madasar.com/en/2020/06/10/feature/politics/militants-launch-attacks-on-north-sinai-tribes-following-renewed-call-to-mobilize-alongside-armed-forces/>

⁶ GHAMRAWI, Muhammad. “Egypt Brings Long-Awaited Compensation to Thousands of Nubians,” *Al-Monitor*, 11 February 2020. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/egypts-nubians-get-more-money-but-little-hope-of-return.html

⁷ EGYPT TODAY. “Egypt’s PM witnesses compensation of Nubians displaced by dam construction,” 20 January 2020. www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/79830/Egypt-s-PM-witnesses-compensation-of-Nubians-displaced-by-dam

⁸ AL-MONITOR. “Skepticism Looms over Egypt’s Plan to Develop Sinai,” 1 September 2019. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/egypt-sinai-investments-plan-development-316-million-usd.html

development plan of the area initiated in 2018 in order to uproot the *Wilaya Sinai* organization and strengthen the connection between the Peninsula and the Egyptian mainland.

Nevertheless, the main priorities of the regime regarding urban development remain the building of a new administrative capital, and the transformation of Cairo into a touristic pole (the Great Egyptian Museum, opening of a new airport in Giza and renovation of downtown Cairo and Heliopolis). This policy has encountered resistance from the inhabitants of different neighbourhoods (Maspero, Heliopolis, Warraq island, and even the upper-class neighbourhood of Zamalek), who criticize the plans of the government because of how they affect their way of life.⁹

Social Unrest without Political Perspective

Indeed, if traditional forms of mobilization (strikes and demonstrations) have declined in Egypt since 2013, localized mobilization has been on the rise, with people expressing their grievances, especially through social media. It is hard for Egyptians to find channels to express this discontent, due to the tight control the regime holds over the media, trade unions and civil society organizations. In addition, the former hegemonic party of President Mubarak, the National Democratic Party, was disbanded after the 2011 revolution and never replaced, and, since their dissolution in June 2011, the local councils have never been reelected. Members and representatives of this party were able to play a mediating role between the central State and local communities, and nothing has replaced them since the

25 January revolution. The opposition itself has been unable to channel the social demands of the poorest and most marginalized areas: the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies are still facing repression and are consequently excluded from the political arena, and when several secular parties gathered in June 2019 in order to prepare the 2020 parliamentary elections (the "Coalition of Hope"), their leaders were arrested.¹⁰

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This context, predictably¹¹ is paving the way towards a sudden explosion of anger, such as happened on 20-21 September 2019, following the videos published by real estate entrepreneur, Muhammad Ali, denouncing corruption at the highest levels of the State. Protesters in several cities called for the end of the regime and the resignation of President el-Sisi.¹² Despite the repression and arrests of more than two thousand people, further demonstrations took place a week later, on 27 September.¹³ Many of the arrested apparently had little or no connection with the demonstrations.¹⁴ And the repression is not only political and social, but is also aimed at enforcing moral order. Recently, several young people who are popular on social media have been arrested on morality charges.¹⁵

⁹ WAHBA, Dina. "Urban Rights and Local Politics in Egypt: The Case of the Maspero Triangle," *Arab Reform Initiative's Research Papers*, 23 January 2020. www.arab-reform.net/publication/urban-rights-and-local-politics-in-egypt-the-case-of-the-maspero-triangle/

¹⁰ DUNNE, Michele. "Arresting Hope in Egypt," *Diwan*, 9 July 2019. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79457>

¹¹ See for instance, the last IEMed Y: ROLL, Stephen and MIEHE, Luca. "Egypt Engulfed by Militarism," In: *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2019*. www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2019/Egypt_Militarism_Politics_Stephen_Roll_Luca_Miehe_IEMed_MedYearbook2019.pdf

¹² MICHAELSON, Ruth. "Hundreds of Egyptians Arrested in Latest Wave of Protests against Sisi," *The Guardian*, 22 September 2019. www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/22/hundreds-of-egyptians-arrested-in-latest-wave-of-protests-against-sisi

¹³ YEE, Vivian and RASHWAN, Nada. "In Egypt, Scattered Protests Break Out for Second Week," *New York Times*, 27 September 2019. www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/middleeast/egypt-protests.html

¹⁴ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. "Egypt: Largest Wave of Mass Arrests since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi Came to Power," 2 October 2019. www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/egypt-largest-wave-of-mass-arrests-since-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi-came-to-power/

¹⁵ MADA MASR. "Ongoing Arrests of Social Media Personalities on Morality Charges," 1 June 2020. <https://madamasr.com/en/2020/06/01/news/politics/ongoing-arrests-of-social-media-personalities-on-morality-charges/>

A Pandemic Putting the State and Society under Stress

Like everywhere else in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed conflicts within Egyptian society. The first case of the disease appeared mid-February, and schools, universities, churches and mosques have been closed, and international flights

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suspended, since 15 March 2020. A partial curfew was enforced on 25 March, with non-essential shops being closed at night and during the weekends, and bars, coffee shops, restaurants and sports

facilities shut down completely. Four tourist governorates have been put in quarantine and totally isolated from the rest of the country. Such measures have also targeted cities, towns and even certain building blocks. Since 30 May, the wearing of face-masks is mandatory in public spaces. In addition, the State has taken measures to support the economy: reducing the price of energy, postponing the payment of taxes in some sectors, granting special loans to tourist facilities and distributing cash to workers in the informal sector.

During the crisis, tensions arose between the doctors' union and the government. Indeed, doctors' representatives published an open letter to the Prime Minister on 10 May 2020, calling for a full lockdown.¹⁶ Moreover, the union has contested the Health Minister's policy, accusing him of putting their lives at risk,¹⁷ and a doctor has publicly condemned the excessive centralization of the administration as an obstacle to taking adequate decisions on the ground.¹⁸ From the other side, some officials accused the population, and especially the youth, of being responsible for spreading the virus, pointing to the lack of adherence to social distancing.¹⁹

¹⁶ EGYPTIAN STREETS. "Egyptian Doctors Call for Full Lockdown in Letter to the Prime Minister," 10 May 2020. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/05/10/egyptian-doctors-call-for-full-lockdown-in-letter-to-the-prime-minister/>

¹⁷ AL-MASRY AL-YOUM. "Doctors Syndicate Holds the Ministry of Health for Infection of its Members by Corona," [in Arabic] 25 May 2020. www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1980842

¹⁸ AL-AMMARI, Iman. "A Doctor at Esna Hospital: It is not the Prerogative of the Officials to Limit the Admission of Patients," *Al-Bawaba* [in Arabic], 9 June 2020. www.albawabnews.com/4044881?fbclid=IwAR3q5b2fwJbeAM2FtfM_Ssz2V8I-y2iel-ZKtqvcPb-AcKCyd672CV3s3Ys

¹⁹ SAÏD, "Minister of Health: The Increasing Case Numbers is the Responsibility of Citizens, not the State," [in Arabic] 9 May 2020. <https://frama.link/FDqwvyEw>