

# The Consolidation of Authoritarianism in al-Sisi's Egypt

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Egypt began 2018 with the announcement by the recently created National Election Authority (NEA) of a presidential election, the third since the outbreak of the revolution in January 2011 that forced Hosni Mubarak to step down. The first round of the election would be held from 26 to 28 March and the candidates would, officially, have barely a month to campaign. Both the calendar and the conditions to be met by those seeking to run against the incumbent President, the military man Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, were designed to ensure that he would emerge as the only option.

And so he did. On 2 April, the NEA announced the final results. Unsurprisingly, al-Sisi was declared the winner, with 97.08% of the votes, practically the same percentage he had won in 2014.<sup>1</sup> His sole rival, Mousa Mostafa Mousa, obtained 2.92%. A low-profile politician and president of the Ghad party, he had been pressured to run at the last minute, whilst seeking endorsements for the re-election of al-Sisi; hence, his nickname, 'the stooge candidate.'

In light of al-Sisi's landslide victory, the most important figure from the election was turnout, particularly since the entire opposition had called for a boycott. According to the official numbers, both in

Egypt and abroad, 41% of eligible voters turned out to vote, i.e. participation was down 6% from 2014, when it stood at 47%. The percentage of spoiled ballots was 7.27% (up from 4% in 2014), meaning more spoiled ballots were cast than votes for the second-place candidate. According to the NEA, no complaints were received nor any significant violations reported by the candidates or ex officio by any of the 54 national and international organizations and institutions acting as observers.<sup>2</sup> However, given that all these organizations had been hand-picked by the NEA itself, their observation work might be better described as symbolic, as the legitimacy of the election was never cast in doubt. The foreign institutions and organizations did not include the European Union or Democracy International, which had monitored the 2014 election, and most of the national ones worked in development and had ties to the regime or were even state bodies.

This lack of challenges is surprising given the local and foreign media reports that the government, along with businesspeople who backed the regime, had engaged in all manner of manoeuvres to get out the vote: from extending the last day of voting by an hour to threatening to fine anyone who did not vote 500 pounds, bringing civil servants to the polling places or handing out rice and oil at the exit from the polls.<sup>3</sup> All of these moves, made with a view to legitimizing a second al-Sisi term to last until 2022, were simply reflections of an authoritarian tension that highlights the regime's fragility.

<sup>1</sup> The official results are available on the website (in Arabic) of the National Electoral Authority (ANE) at [www.elections.eg/results-2018](http://www.elections.eg/results-2018).

<sup>2</sup> "Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi wins second 4-year term as Egypt's president in landslide victory with 97% of valid votes," *Ahram Online*, 2 April 2018, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/294901/Egypt/Politics-/President-AbdelFattah-ElSisi-wins-second-fouryear-.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> MICHAELSON, Ruth. "Egypt election: polls open concerns over voter apathy," *The Guardian*, 26 March 2018, [www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/26/egypt-election-polls-open-amid-concerns-over-voter-apaty](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/26/egypt-election-polls-open-amid-concerns-over-voter-apaty).

## A Stifling Political Climate

Al-Sisi had set in motion all the machinery of the State to prevent the participation of potential candidates who might overshadow him or even cause a rift in the army, such as former chief of staff Sami Anan. As soon as they announced their intention to stand for President, they were arrested or forced to withdraw, along with other prominent figures from the Egyptian political scene.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most significant arrests was that of the aforementioned former chief of staff Anan, who not only had the backing of certain sectors of the army who disagreed with al-Sisi, but also of Islamist forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). This was immediately followed by the arrest of the former anti-corruption chief Hisham Genena, who had been part of Anan's campaign team. After that, the 2012 presidential candidate, former member of the MB and founder of the *Misr al-Qawia* (Strong Egypt) party, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, was arrested after giving a television interview in London in which he harshly criticized al-Sisi. The veteran politician was accused of membership of a terrorist organization and seeking to destabilize the country. Another arrested army officer was Colonel Ahmed Konsowa, who was swiftly tried by a military court and found guilty of "having expressed political opinions as a serving military officer" when he announced his intention to run in a YouTube video.

In addition to these cases, the former MP Mohamed Anwar Sadat – nephew of former President Anwar El Sadat – chose not to announce his bid citing security reasons. Mention should likewise be made of the candidate Ahmad Shafik, the last Prime Minister appointed by Mubarak, who came in second in the 2012 presidential election, winning 49% of the vote against the ultimate victor, the Islamist Mohammed Morsi. After announcing his candidacy in November 2017, he was deported from the United Arab Emirates, an ally of the al-Sisi regime, where he had been living in self-imposed exile. From the

moment he arrived in Cairo, there was speculation regarding his arrest. His withdrawal closed the door on a candidacy that had the backing of the portion of the business class not linked to the army and of those nostalgic for Mubarak. The last candidate to pull out in protest over Anan's arrest, and under pressure from certain sectors of his party, *Aish we Horreiya* (Bread and Freedom), was the progressive lawyer Khaled Ali, who also ran in 2012. Ali had begun to win substantial popular support in 2015, when he led the defence in the courts of Egyptian sovereignty over the Red Sea islands Tiran and Sanafir, which al-Sisi had ceded to Saudi Arabia.

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This atmosphere of repression against political opponents led Human Rights Watch and more than a dozen other Egyptian and international associations to release a statement in which they warned that the presidential election would not be "fair nor free" and called upon Egypt's allies, especially the United States and the European Union, to denounce "these farcical elections."<sup>5</sup>

## Apparent Economic Stability

President al-Sisi has billed the country's economic recovery, especially to his foreign partners, as an alleged achievement of his first term. According to the data provided by the Egyptian government itself, there was indeed economic growth – 5.2% of GDP by the end of 2017 – and an increase in foreign cur-

<sup>4</sup> On the 'purge' carried out against the potential candidates for the 2018 presidential election, see the following file from the PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY (POMED): "Dropping like flies: Sisi's Purge of Potential Candidates in Egypt's 2018 Presidential Election," January 2018, [http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PresidentialCandidates\\_web.pdf](http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PresidentialCandidates_web.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> 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](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/13/egypt-planned-presidential-vote-neither-free-nor-fair). The US-based Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) also published a very critical report on al-Sisi's policies, warning of "the dangerous erosion of the social contract" in a second al-Sisi term, <https://timep.org/special-reports/raising-the-stakes-implications-of-a-second-sisi-term/>.

rency reserves.<sup>6</sup> However, these positive macroeconomic results were achieved at the cost of a substantial increase in domestic and foreign debt. During al-Sisi's presidency, domestic debt increased by 74% and foreign debt by 75%. This increase in the debt was not offset by any structural changes in national production, significant increase in job creation, or improvements in healthcare or education.

The State was able to resolve the foreign currency crisis by taking on foreign debt and devaluing the Egyptian pound 50% – which translated to a reduction of civil servants' salaries by half – following the liberalization of the exchange rate in November 2016. That same month, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced the approval of a \$12 billion loan for Egypt to be disbursed over a period of three years, the largest loan ever granted by the organization in the region. However, there were no significant improvements to the sources of foreign currency, as tourism revenues did not rebound to the levels they had been at prior to the start of al-Sisi's first term, nor did exports reach the levels the government projected they would following the currency devaluation. Revenues from the Suez Canal have declined in the last four years, despite promises that they would increase following the inauguration of the massive enlargement project in August 2015.<sup>7</sup> Inflation is one of the most revealing indicators of the effects that the measures put into place by the President have had on the lives of ordinary Egyptians. Average inflation in 2017 stood at 30.7%, with a high of 33%. However, the prices of some goods and services have increased by up to 100%. Although at the start of 2018, the rate dipped 5%, prices have not gone down. This dizzying increase in the price of staple goods has especially impacted the most disadvantaged classes. More than one in four people in the country face extreme economic difficulties: 28%

of the population lives below the poverty line, a situation that has worsened in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Should austerity measures continue to be applied, with the resulting price hikes and reductions in subsidies, protests and mobilizations of the most impoverished social classes cannot be ruled out.

### The Security Excuse

Hosni Mubarak designed Egypt's regional leadership based on its role as the 'guarantor of regional stability' in the face of the Islamist threat. Since coming to power, al-Sisi has used the same argument both to ratify the strength of Egyptian foreign policy and to bolster his own regime.<sup>9</sup> In this return to the authoritarian paradigm of the 1980s and 1990s, he moreover has the backing of the European and US governments, which see the al-Sisi regime as the best guarantee for restoring security interests.

Al-Sisi implemented this 'hard line' approach to the fight against jihadist terrorism in his first term and sought to consolidate it during the election period. In February 2018, the Egyptian armed forces launched a large-scale counterterrorism campaign called 'Operation Sinai 2018.'<sup>10</sup> The northern region of the peninsula was completely cut off, although the territory had already been under state-of-emergency law since October 2014, preventing journalists and researchers from accessing it, amongst other things. Coinciding with the war campaign, various US media outlets published accounts by former US officials of hundreds of strikes carried out by Israeli warplanes, drones and helicopters against Daesh and other terrorist groups in the Egyptian Sinai in recent years. The strikes were conducted with the approval of al-Sisi as part of the counterterrorism effort, although neither the Egyp-

<sup>6</sup> All of these data are available in EL SHARNOUBI, Osman, "Sisi's balance sheet," *Mada Masr*, 26 March 2018, <https://madamirror.appspot.com/www.madamasr.com/en/2018/03/26/feature/economy/sisis-balance-sheet/>.

<sup>7</sup> EVANNO, Severine. "Égypte: canal de Suez, encore un projet pharaonique... et contesté," *Orient XXI*, 20 October 2014, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/egypte-canal-de-suez-encore-un-projet-pharaonique-et-conteste,0727>.

<sup>8</sup> THE WORLD BANK. *Country Poverty Brief: Middle East and North Africa: Egypt*, October 2017, [http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/B2A3A7F5-706A-4522-AF99-5B1800FA3357/9FE8B43A-5EAE-4F36-8838-E9F58200CF49/60C691C8-EAD0-47BE-9C8A-B56D672A29F7/Global\\_POV\\_SP\\_CPB\\_EGY.pdf](http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/B2A3A7F5-706A-4522-AF99-5B1800FA3357/9FE8B43A-5EAE-4F36-8838-E9F58200CF49/60C691C8-EAD0-47BE-9C8A-B56D672A29F7/Global_POV_SP_CPB_EGY.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> AZAOLA PIAZZA, Bárbara. "The Foreign Policy of Post-Mubarak Egypt and the Strengthening of Relations with Saudi Arabia: Balancing between Economic Vulnerability and Regional and Regime Security," *Journal of North African Studies*, 7-8, 2018, [www.tandfonline.com/eprint/m3C8HRNQWXipiYSvdiwp/full](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/m3C8HRNQWXipiYSvdiwp/full).

<sup>10</sup> On this military campaign, see the dossier published by *Mada Masr* at [www.madamasr.com/en/topic/operation-sinai-2018/](http://www.madamasr.com/en/topic/operation-sinai-2018/).

tian nor the Israeli authorities acknowledged it.<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International condemned the use of cluster bombs by the Egyptian army.<sup>12</sup>

**There was indeed economic growth and an increase in foreign currency reserves. However, these positive macroeconomic results were achieved at the cost of a substantial increase in domestic and foreign debt**

The cooperation between the Egyptian and Israeli governments has grown stronger during the al-Sisi presidency, not only with regard to security, but also trade. Proof of this can be seen in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's celebration of an "historic" agreement signed in February 2018, whereby Egypt – through the private company Dolphinos – would receive \$15 billion of gas from Israel over the next ten years.<sup>13</sup>

A second al-Sisi term means continued prioritization of security issues, not only to secure the country's borders, but also the regime itself. Al-Sisi's relentless struggle against Islamist terrorism has served as an excuse to adopt authoritarian measures and to restrict the space for political and associational activity. The state of exception, which has remained in force since April 2017, is renewed every

three months. It is worth recalling that throughout the 30 years in which Mubarak was in power, a state of emergency was also in force and completely conditioned the country's political life. The decision-making process will become more opaque and the hegemony of the armed forces over the main sectors of the State will be reaffirmed. However, such a concentration of power in a single player can generate intra-regime tensions to control the levers of power, leading to new cracks in the system. The economic situation will also be decisive in how events play out.

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<sup>11</sup> JAFFE, Greg. "Israelis target ISIS fighters in Egypt as part of covert counterterrorism pact," *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/israelis-target-isis-fighters-in-egypt-as-part-of-covert-counterterrorism-pact/2018/02/03/9b853bcc-091b-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fd7cdba74bab](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/israelis-target-isis-fighters-in-egypt-as-part-of-covert-counterterrorism-pact/2018/02/03/9b853bcc-091b-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html?utm_term=.fd7cdba74bab); THAROOR, Ishaan. "Israel's growing ties with former Arab foes," *The Washington Post*, 5 February 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/05/israels-growing-ties-with-former-arab-foes/?utm\\_term=.d91e2a4abf12](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/05/israels-growing-ties-with-former-arab-foes/?utm_term=.d91e2a4abf12).

<sup>12</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. "Egypt: Use of banned cluster bombs in North Sinai confirmed by Amnesty International," 1 March 2018, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/egypt-use-of-banned-cluster-bombs-in-north-sinai-confirmed-by-amnesty-international/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/egypt-use-of-banned-cluster-bombs-in-north-sinai-confirmed-by-amnesty-international/).

<sup>13</sup> AL JAZEERA. "Egyptian, Israeli firms sign \$15bn natural gas deal," *Al Jazeera*, 19 February 2018, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/egyptian-israeli-firms-sign-15bn-natural-gas-deal-180219170832026.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/egyptian-israeli-firms-sign-15bn-natural-gas-deal-180219170832026.html).