

A Decade of al-Sisi in Power: Between Economic Crisis, Repression and the Search for International Recognition*

Bárbara Azaola Piazza

Research Group on Arab and Muslim
Societies (GRESAM)
University of Castilla-La Mancha

A decade after the coup led by Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi against the democratically elected president of the republic, the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, the process of authoritarian restoration has got a firm foothold in Egypt. In a domestic context of increasingly consolidated authoritarianism and deepening economic crisis following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the regime is seeking to whitewash the country's image and gain international recognition with exclusionary and dubious political initiatives.

A Deepening Economic Crisis

With a population of around 105 million people, Egypt has been experiencing an economic crisis for years that was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic in 2020 and has grown even more acute since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. One of the many consequences of this crisis situation has been the near total shortage of foreign currency and a devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which has lost more than half its value against the US dollar since March 2022 (1 pound=30 dollars in January 2023). The most recent devaluation to date was the result of a “flexible” exchange rate policy imposed under the agreement approved in December by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to provide the country with a new \$3 bil-

lion loan to “preserve macroeconomic stability and the sustainability of Egyptian debt,” among other goals. It is the fourth package the institution has granted to the country since 2016, bringing the total amount lent to more than \$20 billion. Although it initially allowed the country to register positive macroeconomic indicators – 5.3% growth between 2017 and 2019 – it has also made it one of the countries most indebted to this organization in the world, trailing only Argentina. According to the Central Bank of Egypt, the country's external debt ballooned from \$46 billion in 2014, at the start of al-Sisi's first term, to nearly \$160 billion in March 2022, the highest figure since 1997, equivalent to an increase of more than 300%.¹ At the regional level, Egypt is also one of the main beneficiaries of financial injections from the Gulf states – having received \$114 billion dollars in ten years – for whose rulers al-Sisi is a key guarantor of regional stability. When negotiating with international political and financial institutions, the regime has relied on successive technocratic governments over the last decade with a view to offering them greater guarantees. In August 2022, a government reshuffle resulted in the incorporation of 13 new ministers, all technocrats and most with ties to the world of finance. The governor of the Central Bank was likewise replaced by a veteran banker. These cabinets, with their technical profile and greater responsibilities in emergency situations, bear witness to the progressive depoliticization of the government, which, in reality, is controlled by the military establishment. The objectives of the latest IMF-approved programme include reducing the role of state-owned enterprises, including those belonging to the army, and encouraging their replacement by increases

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¹ CEIC – Central Bank of Egypt, www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/egypt/external-debt.

in the private sector. Notwithstanding Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly's 2022 assurances that private investment in the country would grow from 30% to 65%, that target seems unrealistic, given the conditions of the Egyptian market. The armed forces are the country's largest financial player and have given rise to what some researchers have called a reformulation of state capitalism that concentrates economic power without addressing or correcting inequalities.

According to a survey conducted by *AI Monitor* between December 2022 and January 2023, 68% of the population in Egypt, Turkey, Yemen, Tunisia and Iraq were concerned about their ability to access food in the next six months. Around 70% of Egyptians responded that food and beverage prices had become very expensive in the last month, and 54% said that the price of bread had risen sharply. Indeed, inflation has been relentless in Egypt, reaching a year-on-year rate of 33.9% in March 2023 versus 12.1% in the same period a year ago, according to official data. The government has attributed this record inflation to rising fuel and food prices, coinciding with the celebration of Ramadan, in which the cost of cereals and bread in particular has risen (6.5%). Wheat supply in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been of special concern for the world's largest importer of this grain. Egypt imported up to 80% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine prior to the start of the conflict.

Civil Society: Between Attempts at Neutralization and Repression

Under pressure from the Biden Administration, in October 2021, Egypt lifted the state of emergency, in force in the country since April 2017. Nevertheless, al-Sisi has continued to invoke counterterrorism discourse to normalize, institutionalize and legitimize extrajudicial practices that directly target civilians and opponents. The real purpose of the regime's counterterrorism discourse is to create an atmosphere in which human rights violations by the state are not only normalized or legitimized, but also justifiable, and to endow the military regime that emerged on 3 July 2013 with a new legal and political legitimacy. To this end, it relies on a

restrictive legislative framework intended to silence critical voices that seek to curb the state's authoritarian practices. One such example is Law 149/2019 on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

Both local and foreign NGOs had until 12 April 2023 to register under this law. One week earlier, the Minister of Social Solidarity Nevine el-Kabbag had threatened to dissolve all organizations that failed to register by the deadline, ruling out any possibility of extending it, despite calls to rescind this ultimatum from some twenty organizations with operations in the country, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The minister also announced that 35,653 of the country's 52,500 civil society organizations had already applied for registration. The 2019 law, which replaced a 2017 law that had been widely criticized for imposing excessive state control over civil society, continues to grant the authorities overly broad powers to oversee the registration, activities, funding and dissolution of NGOs. It also restricts their activities by limiting their work to "social development," a vague concept that could effectively be used to prohibit human rights work. In addition, it prohibits investigations and the publication of the findings thereof without prior government authorization. In recent years, the country's largest human rights NGOs, including those that provide free legal assistance to victims of human rights violations, have operated as non-profit companies or legal aid firms and thus run the risk of being dissolved should they fail to formalize their registration. Those that have registered under the law have consistently complained that the authorities have delayed or denied approval of their funding and their projects.

After 18 years of activity, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information suspended its operations in January 2022 due to the repressive environment in the country and the lack of even minimal respect for human rights. Its director, Gamal Eid, is one of the 13 people linked to local NGOs who remain under investigation for Case 173/2011 on the legitimate work of civil society organizations, known as the "foreign funding" case, who have been banned from leaving the country and whose assets have been frozen since 2016.² In 2019, they lost an appeal against

² In December 2011, the Egyptian authorities raided the headquarters of 17 Egyptian and foreign NGOs working on democracy and human rights, accusing them of receiving foreign funding in what is known as Case 173/2011. The 43 people convicted were ultimately acquitted and spared from prison, although the Egyptian authorities divided the case into two parts, exonerating the foreign organizations, while keeping the case against the local NGOs open.

these measures even though their lawyers pointed out that travel bans cannot be legally imposed for more than two years and that, in the absence of documented evidence of the accusation, they are both unconstitutional and illegal.

The “Greenwashing” Summit: COP27

In this context of persecution and harassment of independent NGOs, the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) was inaugurated on 7 November 2022 in the Egyptian city of Sharm el-Sheikh. This “green-washing” summit was boycotted by various international environmental activists and organizations in protest of the host country’s government’s repression and because it was being held in a place that suffers the effects of climate change quite directly even as its leaders prevent environmental organizations from doing their work independently. The regime denied accreditation to local environmental organizations, and the police arrested hundreds of people in the weeks leading up to and during the summit, accusing them of planning demonstrations against al-Sisi. Other human rights activists and lawyers, such as Hossam Bahgat, executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, one of the people investigated in Case 173/2011, who remains banned from leaving the country and whose bank accounts are still frozen, took advantage of the safe space and platform provided by the United Nations to denounce the regime’s repression and demand the release of political prisoners. At least for the days the summit lasted, both he and Sanaa Seif managed to get international news outlets, as well as social media, to focus on the human rights agenda and the latter’s campaign to secure the release of her brother, the British-Egyptian activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah. Abd El-Fattah, who had been imprisoned in 2013 and released for a brief six-month hiatus in 2019 before being rearrested, had initiated a full hunger strike on the eve of the summit’s inauguration. Despite the case’s coverage and the alleged intercession of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for his release, Abd El-Fattah remains in prison at the time of writing and

had to end his hunger strike for medical reasons a few days before the summit’s end.

An Exclusionary National Dialogue

On 26 April 2022, coinciding with the annual Egyptian Family Iftar celebration in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, President al-Sisi announced before various representatives of Egyptian society the launch of a “national dialogue” as part of the process of establishing a “new republic.” This dialogue would be led by the National Youth Conference, which, in turn, was sponsored by the National Training Academy (NTA), an institution directly overseen by al-Sisi, who would participate in the final meetings. The NTA unilaterally appointed as general coordinator Diah Rashwan, head of the State Information Service and former head of the Egyptian Press Syndicate,³ who undertook the planning of the various committees and subcommittees that would participate in this dialogue between “all political parties without exception,” as well as various representatives of institutions and social organizations. A registration form was set up on the National Youth Conference website (<https://egyouth.com/ar/register/>) for anyone interested in participating, and a WhatsApp number was enabled to receive proposals. At the same event, President al-Sisi also announced the reactivation of the Presidential Pardon Committee.

From the outset, the regime made it clear that the Muslim Brotherhood was excluded from this initiative. The Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization in December 2013, five months after the al-Sisi-led coup against the Islamist President Morsi. The political opposition’s response to this proposal was spearheaded by the Civil Democratic Movement, a coalition that emerged in 2017 and has brought together up to 12 opposition political parties and more than a hundred independent public figures. The movement laid out a series of conditions needed to engage in such a dialogue, including, among others, the participation of a proportional number of representatives of the regime and of the opposition; the inclusion of democratic political reforms, in addition to far-reaching social and economic ones; addressing the human rights situ-

³ In March 2023, the independent candidate with ties to the left, Khaled al-Balshy, defied expectations and won the elections to head the Press Syndicate.

ation; and, as a priority, the release of political prisoners who have not committed violent acts.⁴

One year later, following several announcements of its imminent start (July 2022, January 2023), the board of directors set 3 May 2023 as the start date. However, due to the constant imprisonment of activists, journalists, TikTok creators and all other critics of the regime, as reported by various human rights organizations, “any hope for a national dialogue is completely lost.” In March 2023, the Egyptian Front for Human Rights (EFHR) posted on its social media that, ten months after the Presidential Pardon Committee’s reactivation, the Egyptian authorities had released around 1,035 prisoners vs 3,038 people who had been arbitrarily arrested in the same period. The organization submitted a series of recommendations to the subcommittee responsible for human rights to “ensure that the participants in the dialogue did not end up as mere tools used to burnish the regime’s image and export a false image of political progress led by those in control of the country.” In this line, in its 2023 annual report, the international organization Human Rights Watch noted how the Egyptian government had sought to whitewash the country’s image, including by launching a national dialogue sponsored by the President.

It is hard to believe that a real national dialogue has been undertaken while laws such as the Law on Counterterrorism (Law No. 94 of 2015), which adopted a broad, ambiguous and politicized definition of terrorism in order to prevent any pretence of reform or democratization in the country, remain in place. Under this law, all types of protests, including peaceful ones, are considered terrorist acts by the State. By associating the political opposition with terrorist activities, the Egyptian government demonizes calls for political reform and delegitimizes the “peaceful” opposition. The Civil Democratic Movement has reiterated that it will only participate once the previously agreed terms have been addressed and, specifically, the release of prisoners of conscience.

In conclusion, a decade after the al-Sisi-led coup against President Morsi, the entrenchment of authoritarianism in Egypt is clear. In the context of an economic crisis that has only grown worse since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, with soaring prices, food shortages, growing inequality and strong

repression, the regime is striving to whitewash the country’s image abroad with limited political initiatives that offer little reason for hope.

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⁴ According to human rights organizations, there could be close to 100,000 political prisoners in Egyptian jails. The Civil Democratic Movement submitted its political plan for the national dialogue in December 2022.