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We need to talk about Egyptian elections!

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While the 2018 elections are approaching, few believe that anything will change in the army's control of the Egyptian regime. When the regime imprisoned opposing candidates General Sami Hafez Ana and Khaled Ali and others withdrew from the electoral race, it was made crystal clear that Al-Sisi's position would not be at stake. So, why should anyone study the upcoming Egyptian elections? Could there be a real opposition or is Sisi that untouchable?

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Betrayed elections

The March elections will not find Egypt or its President Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi in a good place as the country is still facing a problematic, unstable economy that results in the deterioration of the living standards of the Egyptian people.¹ It is also at this moment holding a military operation against ISIS insurgents in the Sinai Peninsula and fighting against Muslim extremism.² Last but not least, Egyptian security forces are facing accusations for ongoing violations of human rights that have drawn the attention of NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Western allies such as the USA that decided on freezing aid to Egypt until the country commits to the better respect of human rights.³

Therefore, the election period could have been a promising platform for political dialogue and for new debates in Egyptian politics. This has not been the case in these elections, where it has been rather difficult, if not dangerous for anyone to participate or express himself politically free from censorship or prosecution. Nevertheless, an important part of the existing opposition, either from the Islamist side or the secular one, is either imprisoned or exiled. All the while, the Muslim Brotherhood is still designated as a terrorist organisation.

General Sisi had to organise this election, for many only to satisfy the Western allies and trick them into believing the appearance of a functioning democracy in the country. Hosni Mubarak's similar move in 2005 had offered the chance for new political powers to arise, and, to a great extent, created the space for the political activism of the 2011 movements, which ultimately led to his ousting and to the first free elections for the country in 2012.

Sisi aims to avoid Mubarak's mistakes by forcibly monitoring the process and prohibiting the participation of actual political players in these elections. Following blackmails and arrests, the only standing political opponent is Mousa Mostafa Mousa, an openly Sisi supporter, whose role is to provide the minimum of a democratic procedure and to be presented as a false alternative.⁴ Any calls for boycotting the elections from the silenced opposition have faced further repression from the regime and protesters have been warned to stay at home. Political expression would not be an option in these elections; the next power that needed to be silenced is the mass media.

During the pre-election period, the regime has further targeted mass media in Egypt, which are facing unprecedented censorship. During the previous years, the regime either proceeded to the closure of opposing Egyptian media, such as newspapers Al-Borsa and Daily News Egypt, and 425 websites including, Misr al-Arabiya and Cairo Portal, or alternatively had them bought out by businessmen close to the regime.⁵ Meanwhile, strict laws were passed that gave the right of media control and censorship to the government and many Egyptian reporters and journalists got imprisoned. Not long ago, the government turned against foreign NGOs and media. Its latest victim has been BBC; the government blocked access to the BBC website after a report on "forced disappearances" and torture of political activists.⁶ As it is now common in world politics, government officials are accusing the media for fake news and for harming the country's reputation. Meanwhile, Sisi warned, in the beginning of March, that any insult directed at the Egyptian security forces in the media would be treated as an act of treason and would be punished as such.⁷ For instance, recently, the Ministry of Interior targeted a pro-government talk show host, who got detained after airing a policeman's wife complaining about police forces salaries.⁸

All in all, Sisi's administration is still holding strong. His iron grip seems to be working on the people, despite his falling popularity due to failing to fix the economic issues of the country as well as ousting the insurgents at Sinai. The sole thing he has to deal with is small public support at the elections, which is expected to be even lower than in the previous elections, when the polls had to be held open for longer than expected in order to force people to vote.⁹ The only weapon at the disposal of the regime's non-supporters is abstention as their only way to pressure the procedure.

An opposition from the inside?

Given the circumstances of a fearful political atmosphere, the fact that five people posed their candidacy is perhaps an indicator that Sisi's position is not as stable as it once was. Human rights lawyers Khaled Ali and Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat were not posing a severe threat to the regime, as the secular and democratic movement in Egypt has lost its hope and momentum and was merely trying to open up a small space for democratic expression in Egyptian politics.

It is the other candidates that should catch the analysts' attention: Ahmed Shafik and Sami Anan, two out of the five candidates, have a military background. With the civilian politicians absent and the democratic mechanisms powerless, it is safe to assume that the only legit opposition could come from within the regime and the security forces. Political developments in 2018, indicate the possibility that certain circles within the regime and the military backed the other military politicians in order to oust Sisi.

Many analysts have concluded that there is an "internal power struggle" between the military and the security services, which is assumed not only by the candidacy of Anan, but also by the spasmodic way with which the regime reacted to it, by arresting him three days after he posted a Facebook video declaring his candidacy, and charging him with violating army regulations and inciting against the army itself.¹⁰ The two former military men had to have had support from certain circles within the armed forces in order to pose their candidacy.¹¹ According to David Hearst, Anan's candidacy was decided in a meeting that included "a number of former senior army generals and civil society figures", with the aim to remove Sisi from power and to use the elections as a platform in order to resolve internal differences.¹²

Could it be that the army, the greatest beneficiary of the regime is dissatisfied with Sisi? It is possible that there are divisions inside the army, derived either from simple love for power or from the economic inequalities amongst the higher and lower officials. At the same time, there is disappointment from people within the parliament and the deep state in regard to national interests, notably with the incident of the Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir that Sisi decided to endow to the Saudis, as well as the failing negotiations with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam in Nile.¹³

This argument is supported by the recent removals of important men in the regime. Two years ago, Sisi had fired Hisham Geneina, the chief of the state anti-corruption body that accused the government for corruption, while only months ago, Sisi fired the head of the General Intelligence Service, who was maybe not that loyal to him. The fact that Hisham Geneina supported and served as a running mate for Sami Anan, also indicates the existence of military cliques that want Sisi out as head of state.¹⁴

It is rather unsafe to talk about the state or the army function with certainty and accuracy because of their lack of transparency and accountability to the people. Nevertheless, recent events have raised questions on the internal antagonisms. At the same time, it could be an indication of the regime's paranoia towards its establishment. It is true that even if the regime has nothing to fear from civilian politics, it counts the challenges made by former military officials. This is evident by the harsh response towards them. While the regime only intimidated civilian candidates, such as Khaled Ali and Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat, it went as far as to arrest the former chief of staff of the armed forces Sami Anan and to detain former air force commander Ahmed Shafiq.

Despite the problematic process and as long as the Western allies do not really trouble themselves with the democratic failure of these elections, nor with the human rights violations, Sisi will be the Egyptian leader for another four years. So far, he seems to be doing well manipulating the opposition from the people as well as from the security forces, but the regime looks less powerful, less popular and therefore more violent and oppressive. With so many national challenges ahead, will Sisi's popularity survive the next four years among the members of the regime?

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