

Egyptian elections held under massive repression

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Egypt's military dictator President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi looks set to win a second term in office, having intimidated, arrested or otherwise eliminated any candidates not to his liking.

The presidential election, to be held March 26-28, highlights the vicious power struggle taking place within the military and intelligence circles that control much of Egypt's economy and its political apparatus.

It takes place amid mounting social and economic dissent among the impoverished working class.

On January 23, the junta arrested former chief of staff of the Egyptian armed forces, Sami Anan, after he announced his candidature. The authorities have also arrested Anan's aide, Egypt's former Auditor General Hesham Geneina, for alleging that Anan possessed secret "documents and evidence" that would undermine the country and its leadership.

Geneina, who was fired after exposing government corruption, said he would release files incriminating senior government figures for incidents following the January 25 revolution, if Anan was harmed in any way.

Anan's confinement in a military prison came soon after the regime pressured another candidate, Ahmed Shafik, a former commander-in-chief of the Egyptian air force and prime minister, to withdraw from the election.

The authorities similarly intimidated Khalid Ali, a human rights lawyer who had also announced his candidature, raiding a publishing house that stored his campaign brochures and arrested his campaign organisers. Ali now faces a three-month prison sentence for "offending public decency."

Mohamed Anwar Sadat, a former member of parliament and nephew of the late Egyptian president and military figure, Anwar Sadat, also stood down under pressure.

In December, Colonel Ahmed Konsowa, who had also announced he wanted to run for the presidency, was detained. A military court sentenced Konsowa to a six-

year jail term for "disobeying military orders by expressing his political views."

Having eliminated all candidates who posed a threat to his rule, al-Sisi has brought in Moussa Mustapha Moussa as a token opposition candidate to avoid a single-candidate election. A trusted member of the military circle around el-Sisi, Moussa—at the behest of former President Hosni Mubarak—organised a split in the Ghad (Tomorrow) Party set up by legislator Ayman Nour, who ran against Mubarak in the 2005 presidential campaign.

With no independent political base, Moussa wholeheartedly supported Sisi's re-election until called upon to oppose him, registering just minutes before the deadline, having been furnished with the requisite 47,000 signatures.

El-Sisi doubtless feels that President Donald Trump's assurances that he is not concerned about human rights and democracy abroad, and that el-Sisi is a "fantastic guy," means that the \$1.3 billion a year in US aid is not in jeopardy. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaking during a visit to Cairo last week as part of a tour of the Middle East to build an anti-Iran coalition, confirmed his support for Egypt and refrained from commenting on el-Sisi's crackdown on his election rivals.

That so many potential presidential candidates are former officers speaks to the enormous divisions and conflicts within military circles that control around 40 percent of Egypt's economy. This has prompted el-Sisi to try and shore up his base of support in the security services. Last October, he replaced the armed forces chief of staff, Mahmoud Hegazy, and appointed him as presidential adviser for strategic planning and crisis management.

El-Sisi also fired a number of leaders in the intelligence services, amid concerns about their loyalty, including Khaled Fawzy, the director of the General Intelligence Directorate since 2014, replacing him with his closest ally

and chief of staff, Major General Abbas Kamel. He has sent a further 17 under-secretaries into retirement.

This comes amid political repression that far exceeds the worst excesses of the Mubarak era. The el-Sisi government has enacted legislation to crush civil society, monitored and censored news, human rights websites and social media, made demonstrations illegal without giving three days' notice, arrested strikers, and carried out campaigns of forced disappearances and torture.

Sweeping new anti-terrorism laws have widened the definition of terrorism to include civil disobedience, giving prosecutors the power to roll over 15-day pre-trial detention periods, often without limit, while the minister of justice has fired nearly half of the 75 judges who called for more democracy in an open letter to Sisi and replaced them with regime loyalists, and sidelined 200 others.

According to human rights groups, at least 60,000 political prisoners languish in Egypt's prisons, compared with between 5,000 and 10,000 at the end of Mubarak's rule. The jails are filled to triple their capacity, despite the government building 16 more prisons.

The state of emergency imposed last autumn after a series of bombings in North Sinai, on the pretext of dealing with "the dangers and funding of terrorism," has been extended for three months.

Last week, police arrested Abdel Moneim Aboul-Fotouh, a presidential candidate in the 2012 elections, who had called for a boycott of the elections, accusing him of links to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and inciting to topple the government, along with six aides.

The call for an election boycott has also been taken up by the Civil Democratic Movement, a loose affiliation of opposition parties and political figures.

Repression is being spurred on by the precarious nature of the Egyptian economy. Egypt was forced to accept the International Monetary Fund's onerous conditions, in return for a \$12 billion three-year loan, that included floating the currency (leading to a 50 percent fall in its value), a value-added tax and multiple cuts to energy, petrol and basic foods subsidies. Inflation soared to 33 percent last year, interest rates rose and growth fell. Many imports are now unaffordable.

At least 35 percent of Egypt's 95 million population are living below the poverty line, up from 28 percent in 2016. Youth unemployment in a country where more than 60 percent of the population is under 30 years of age is a ticking time-bomb. According to the government's statistical service, 26.7 percent of people aged 18-29 are unemployed. Thirty-eight percent of those young people

hold graduate and postgraduate university certificates, while 30 percent hold vocational high school diplomas.

Two weeks ago, seeking to deflect social tensions and bolster the regime—whose standing has been undermined by reports that Israel has carried more than 100 raids on jihadists on Egyptian soil—the military announced a large-scale "Comprehensive Military Operation." While the purpose is to eliminate the country's growing insurgency, the regime has deployed forces not just to the Sinai Peninsula, its primary focus, but also to the Western Desert and parts of the Nile Delta, as well as naval and air force patrols in Egypt's border regions.

This follows a series of high-profile attacks, including last October's ambush that killed 54 members of the security forces in a botched counterterror operation in the Western Desert; last November's attack by Wilayat Sinai, an Islamic State affiliate, on a Sufi mosque that killed 305 worshipers in the deadliest terror attack in Egyptian history, and last December's attack by Wilayat Sinai on the Arish military airport, targeting Minister of Defence Sedky Sobhy and Minister of Interior Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, who were carrying out an unannounced visit to Sinai, killing one officer and injuring two others.

Military planes have launched at least 15 raids in North Sinai, mostly targeting the outskirts of Arish City. The regime ordered the closure of all schools in North Sinai until further notice. According to the Egyptian army, it has killed at least 28 suspected militants in clashes since the operation began.



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