

El-Sisi uses coronavirus pandemic to tighten grip on Egypt

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General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, who seized power in a bloody coup in 2013, is clamping down ever more severely as the coronavirus pandemic pushes Egypt's fragile economy into meltdown and its impoverished people into destitution.

Earlier, the government extended the state of emergency, in existence since April 2017, for the eleventh time, allowing el-Sisi to continue ruling by decree.

Egypt did nothing to prepare for the onset of the virus, despite being identified in early February, along with Algeria and South Africa, as one of the African countries most at risk. As of April 2, the official number of cases in Egypt had risen to 779, while the death toll had risen to 52, including at least one doctor.

These figures are bogus. On March 23, the tightly controlled media announced that two senior members of the Egyptian armed forces, Major General Shafea Abdel Halim Dawoud and Major General Khaled Shaltout, had died, supposedly "while taking part in efforts to contain the outbreak." A third high ranking officer, Mahmoud Shahin, had also tested positive, indicating the rampant spread of the virus.

El-Sisi had been absent from public view, making his first television appearance on March 21 after two weeks of self-isolation to deny that the true infection rate was much higher than official figures. A University of Toronto study in mid-March estimated the number of cases in Egypt at 19,310.

There is little news about Egypt in the media of the imperialist powers, which have backed the blood-soaked dictatorship. Egypt expelled *Guardian* freelance journalist Ruth Michaelson for reporting the Toronto study and reprimanded Declan Walsh, the *New York Times'* Cairo bureau chief, for tweeting about it. The authorities said that anyone found spreading "rumours"

about the prevalence of coronavirus would face imprisonment and fines. Egypt ranks as one of the world's foremost jailers of journalists, along with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and China.

Since coming to power, el-Sisi has thrown 60,000 political activists, critics, including secular and Muslim Brotherhood politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders, into Egypt's notoriously overcrowded and squalid prisons. According to Human Rights Watch, hundreds have died in custody due to medical negligence or the atrocious conditions.

On March 24, the government imposed a two-week, nationwide, 11-hour night-time curfew, and ordered shops and malls selling non-essential goods to close after 5pm and at the weekend. Those caught breaking the curfew face a fine of up to \$254 or jail. Under conditions where one in three Egyptians lives on less than \$1.40 a day and, according to the World Bank, "some 60 percent of Egypt's population is either poor or vulnerable," such closures condemn tens of millions of families to destitution. Evening street markets are a way of life in Egypt, where people supplement their meagre earnings by selling a few goods or possessions.

These restrictions are of limited value without testing suspected cases, tracking their contacts and treating the severely ill, which the regime has neither the capacity nor willingness to undertake.

The virus is likely to spread rapidly through Egypt's densely packed cities, especially Cairo, home to 21 million people living cheek by jowl in tiny spaces. Even under normal conditions, there is a shortage of hospitals to care for the country's 102 million population and a severe shortage of protective equipment for medical staff.

The government has deployed the army to disinfect the streets, patrol neighbourhoods and enforce the

lockdown. Its central task is to ensure there are no mass protests against el-Sisi. Security forces stormed the house of a doctor in the port city of Alexandria, because he criticised on his Facebook page the government's failure to provide personal protective equipment.

The Batel campaign is calling for the release of more than 1,000 imprisoned doctors and health-care professionals to help wage the fight against the spread of the coronavirus. "Egypt cannot be suffering from a shortage of medical personnel, while there are more than 1,000 doctors and health-care workers in prisons," the campaign said, posting the names of more than 100 doctors arrested by the authorities.

Alongside the plummet in tourism, remittances from six million Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich Gulf States are in jeopardy due to the fall in oil prices, plunging demand and pandemic-related closures. For example, Kuwait, where 800,000 Egyptians work, is repatriating 17,000 Egyptian teachers as schools have closed until August.

It leaves Egypt's already shaky economy staring into the abyss, amid years of inflation, particularly following the 50 percent devaluation and economic measures demanded by the IMF in return for a bailout. Foreign direct investment fell from US\$7.7 billion in 2017-18 to \$5.9 billion in 2018-19, a drop of \$1.8 billion, while foreign debt rose by \$16.1 billion, reaching \$108.7 billion at the end of June 2019, a 17.3 percent increase on June 2018.

Three weeks ago, el-Sisi announced that he was setting aside \$6.3 billion as an "emergency economic rescue package"—mostly tax cuts for business, tax holidays for the tourism sector and lower energy costs for factories. He tossed a few crumbs—\$143 million—at the doctors, whose starting salary is around \$159 per month, forcing thousands to emigrate. This sop amounts to a post-tax annual increase of \$15 to \$25, with no increase in the \$1.20 infectious disease allowance.

On March 16, the central bank cut interest rates by three percentage points and provided a \$1.27 billion line of credit to listed companies to shore up Egypt's stock market, which had fallen by 40 percent in the month since the first case was reported mid-February. The banks have since been ordered to limit withdrawals by individuals and businesses to control hoarding,

inflation and stockpiling.

Egypt's second richest man, Naguib Sawiris, speaking on the Saudi-owned *Al-Hadath* channel, demanded that the government order people back to work once the curfew ends on April 8 to prevent economic collapse. "We need a revolutionary decision, regardless of the consequences... Even if people get sick, they will recover. It only kills 1 percent of patients, who are mostly elderly people." He threatened to commit suicide if the curfew was extended.

El-Sisi's response to the coronavirus is in keeping with his role as an enforcer for Egyptian big business, which includes the military. During his nearly seven years in office, he has presided over brutal austerity, while promoting privatization, deregulation and the lifting of government subsidies and integrating Egypt ever more deeply into Washington's alliance with the Sunni petro-states and Israel against Iran.

The Egyptian working class can only build the necessary movement against the banks, corporations and world imperialism by forging a new revolutionary leadership, uniting the impoverished peasantry behind it, and unifying their struggle with that of workers throughout the Middle East and internationally.

It means waging an implacable struggle against the pseudo-left forces that seek to subordinate the struggle of the Egyptian working class and peasantry to one or another section of Egypt's venal capitalist ruling class. The Revolutionary Socialists (RS) have a shameless record of backing one bourgeois faction after another, from the military junta that followed Mubarak's ouster, to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, and then to Sisi and his coup, which the RS hailed as a "second revolution." In its latest statement on the pandemic, the RS states, "And we should strive for real change through revolution but *can begrudgingly settle for radical reform for the time being*" [emphasis added]. The statement concludes with the pathetic declaration, "As responsible citizens of the world, we should expose the current flaws of the system and demand change."



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