Egypt’s el-Sisi steps up repression as opposition mounts to mass poverty and inequality

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Egypt’s military dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is using the courts, new laws and censorship of the internet and social media to suppress all opposition to his brutal regime.

His central objective is to defend Egyptian and foreign capital in the country against a social explosion of the working class who face mass poverty, social inequality, a military kleptocracy and a mounting death toll from COVID-19.

El-Sisi, who took power in a bloody coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated government of President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, has cracked down not just on the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s largest political opposition party that has been branded a terrorist organisation and outlawed, but opponents across the political spectrum.

He rules Egypt through forcible disappearances, mass arrests, the torture of 60,000 political prisoners, many of whom have never stood trial, and executions, whose recorded number, believed to be only a partial list, jumped from 32 in 2019 to 107 in 2020, according to Amnesty International.

He renewed Egypt’s state of emergency for the 18th time since April 2017 outlawing public meetings and demonstrations, sanctioning the detention of people without trial or even without charge and censoring the media. Hundreds of people, including politicians, lawyers, researchers and journalists, have been arrested and tried by the State Security Court, including most recently Ahmed Samir Santawi, a postgraduate student at Central European University in Vienna, Austria. Santawi was sentenced to four years imprisonment for belonging to a terrorist organization and spreading false news on social media, after he and other members of “the hope alliance” were detained for their attempt to run for the 2020 parliamentary elections.

On July 28, the Damanhour Criminal Court imposed the death sentence on 24 Muslim Brotherhood members for the killing of police officers in 2014 and 2015 in two separate cases. Eight of the 24 accused were tried in absentia.

The same day, the Court of Cassation, Egypt’s highest court, rejected appeals against their life sentences in 2014 by Mohamed Badie, the Brotherhood’s leader, his deputy Khairat El-Shater and several others. They were accused of 'collaborating with Hamas,' the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that won the last Palestinian elections in 2006 and controls Gaza, to destabilise national security and stability. This takes place even as Egypt has made peace with Qatar, which has supported Hamas, and begun a rapprochement with Turkey, which it has long accused of providing a safe-haven for the Brotherhood.

On July 25, the State Security Court asked the government to call on Interpol to arrest three Egyptian nationals, including Mohamed Ali, a former construction contractor for el-Sisi and now a critic in exile in Spain, for inciting the public against the government—a reference to the September 2020 protests. The other two are accused of joining the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

Two weeks ago, the authorities detained Abdel Nasser Salama, who was editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram*, the country's leading state-owned newspaper, in the years 2012-2014, on charges of “financing terrorism,” spreading fake news on social media and undermining state agencies and institutions. It follows his Facebook post calling on el-Sisi to resign over his handling of Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance Dam that has led to a “heavy defeat” for Egypt. Ethiopia has started filling the reservoir behind the huge hydro-electric dam on the Blue Nile that provides about 80 percent of the waters of the Nile River flowing into Sudan and Egypt, sparking fears that the two countries may suffer water shortages in drought years.

In June, Yahya Najm, a former Egyptian ambassador to Venezuela who spoke out against the government’s “mismanagement” of the dam crisis was detained and sentenced to 15 days imprisonment pending investigation for 'joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and misusing social media.'

In June, Egypt’s highest civilian court upheld the death sentence for 12 Muslim Brotherhood members in connection with the mass demonstrations in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in August 2013 against el-Sisi’s coup. El-Sisi’s forces carried out one of the most blood-thirsty massacres in recent history, killing at least 1,000 demonstrators. While none of the security forces were prosecuted, the 12 Brotherhood members were

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convicted of “arming criminal gangs which attacked residents and resisted policemen as well as possessing firearms… ammunition… and bomb-making material” and “killing policemen… resisting authorities… and occupation and destruction of public property.”

In April, at least nine people were executed over similar trumped-up charges relating to the 2013 massacre.

The International Commission of Jurists has called the Egyptian judiciary a “tool of repression”, while the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have widely condemned the country’s judicial system.

El-Sisi’s bloody repression takes place as the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated workers’ living conditions. The sudden halt to tourism, which at the onset of the crisis accounted for around 15 percent of GDP, the drop in remittances from workers in the Gulf and foreign currency earnings, the withdrawal by investors of at least $13 billion from Egypt’s debt and equity markets and the partial lockdowns have led to just 35 percent of Egyptians of working age in employment, as 800,000 graduates enter the job market every year. The government, already struggling to keep afloat before the pandemic after its Gulf benefactors, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that had brought el-Sisi to power in 2013 withdrew their support after he failed to support their criminal war in Yemen, faces debt levels approaching 95 percent of GDP.

In return for two loans from the International Monetary Fund, el-Sisi has implemented its diktats: slashed subsidies on basic domestic and agricultural commodities, raised fuel prices, new taxes including a value added tax, cut the health and education budgets, fired government employees and allowed the currency to float. These measures have hiked up the cost of living, ruining much of Egypt’s middle class and leading to soaring poverty rates.

The regime has refused to do anything that would impact on the corporations’ profits, instead providing $6.4 billion for business to offset the impact of the pandemic and announcing a series of measures aimed at curtailing freedom of movement and social behaviour, with little governmental financial support for those who lost their livelihoods, plunging millions into destitution.

Egypt’s dilapidated health care system has proved incapable of coping with the pandemic. Starved of resources, medical staff have emigrated, while hospitals and clinics lack basic equipment, including ventilators, oxygen supplies and personal protection equipment for their staff. Even though more than 500 doctors have died of the disease, doctors have been arrested and harassed if they speak out about the crisis in the country or question the government's figures, while held responsible for patients’ deaths. Less than 2 percent of Egypt’s 100 million people have been vaccinated.

Last week, 2,000 workers at a razor blade factory in the port city of Alexandria went on strike demanding their wages be increased to the minimum monthly wage of at least EGP 2,400 ($150), up from the current average wage of about EGP 2,000 ($127). It is one of a growing number of strikes and protests. According to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), there were 80 labour protests in the first quarter of 2021, including suicides, because of the deterioration of living conditions, and 44 protests in the second quarter. One of the largest protests took place in June when hundreds took to the streets in the working-class Nadi Al-Seed area of Alexandria to protest the planned demolition of their homes to make way for new business and entertainment compounds where they faced hundreds of riot police accompanying the demolition crews.

The first two weeks of July saw five social protests and two labour strikes, of which the more important was by workers of the Nile Linen Group, based in Alexandria’s special economic zone, over the company’s refusal to implement its agreement to raise the minimum wage.

The crisis of the capitalist system and its abject failure to address the social catastrophe affecting the masses is manifested across the Middle East and North Africa. It was the fear of Egypt’s acute economic and social tensions erupting that prompted the military dictator to support Tunisia's President Kais Saeid’s assumption of emergency powers, his sacking of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, suspension of parliament, imposition of a curfew and clampdown on the media, raiding *Al Jazeera* 's bureau and sacking the head of national TV. According to *Middle East Eye*, Egyptian security officials were present when the Tunisian prime minister was beaten in the presidential palace before agreeing to resign.

The Egyptian working class must turn to its allies in the region, its class brothers and sisters, to build an international revolutionary vanguard to lead the struggle for social equality and democratic rights.

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