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EGYPT

Sixty Years of Egyptian Politics: What Has Changed?

El-Sisi's Regime Is Not a Mirror Image of Nasser's. In Fact, the Egyptian State Has Changed Three Times since Nasser's Rule

By Dina Shehata

In recent years, comparisons have often been made between Egyptian presidents Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Gamal Abdel Nasser. Indeed, there are a number of similarities between how both men ruled: both leaders led military movements, which were described as popular revolutions. Both entered an extended confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Both of their states repressed all opposition and sought to curb the independence of the media and of civil society organizations, and both relied on their personal charisma to build legitimacy.

However, behind these apparent similarities and continuities there are equally significant differences. Nasser overthrew the old oligarchic regime made up of the monarchy, the landed elite, and the foreign-born bourgeoisie. In its place, he created a nationalist, socialist-populist, authoritarian regime supported by the military, the state bureaucracy, the salaried middle class, and the lower classes.

El-Sisi, on the other hand, has created a bureaucratic authoritarian regime supported by the military, the upper classes, and some segments of the middle class with the aim of dismantling the welfare state established by Nasser. The primary objectives of this regime have been to restore social order and to restructure the economy in line with the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In fact, since the beginning of Nasser's rule, the Egyptian state has undergone, not two, but three crucial transitions: a transition from populist authoritarianism under Nasser to post-populist or hybrid authoritarianism under Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, and a subsequent transition to bureaucratic authoritarianism under El-Sisi. Each of these transitions has led to the creation of a new type of regime based on a distinct set of interests, social and economic policies, and political institutions and instruments.

◁ Banner of then-army chief Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and former presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, Cairo, July 26, 2013. *Asmaa Waguih/Reuters*

Nasser's Populist Authoritarianism

After staging a successful coup against the Egyptian monarchy on July 23, 1952, the Free Officers Movement led by then-Colonel Nasser proceeded to dismantle the old political order and to establish in its stead a single-party populist authoritarian regime. The ruling coalition consisted of a social contract where the regime promised rapid economic development, social justice, and national independence in return for political allegiance and a suspension of political rights and freedoms. The new regime was brutal in suppressing all attempts to mobilize against it.

Through a series of measures and decrees, the Nasser regime was able to centralize political power and dissolve all pre-existing political parties and movements including the Wafd party, the largest party under the monarchy. Also, after a brief alliance, the Nasser regime entered into an extended confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, which led to the dissolution of its various social and political organizations and the arrest or exile of most of its leaders. The media, civil society organization, labor unions, and religious organizations were brought under the direct control of the regime one way or another: the media was nationalized, and non-governmental organizations were placed under the control of the executive through, for example, Law No. 32 of 1964, also known as the "NGO law."

During the 1950s and 1960s, the regime also came to control some areas of the economy. In 1956, all foreign-owned assets were nationalized, and in 1961, the same happened to a majority of the assets belonging to the Egyptian private sector in accordance with the socialist decrees of July 1961. The regime also embarked on an ambitious industrialization project and oversaw the creation of a large number of new factories.

The Nasser regime undertook social and welfare functions on a wide scale. Examples included the state employment of all university and technical institute graduates, implemented in 1964. Increased state employment led to a dramatic change in the makeup of the Egyptian labor force with the civil service and the public sector dominating the urban, and to a lesser extent, rural labor markets.

Moreover, in 1963, the state passed a new law which made higher education free for all secondary school graduates. As a result, the number of university and technical university students tripled and the number of technical university students, increased sixfold from 1952 to 1969. The regime also subsidized many basic foods and services including housing, transportation, and healthcare.

But in the wake of the Yemen War and the 1967 defeat, the Nasser regime began to experience economic and political troubles, undermining the bargain struck between the state and its people. Many began questioning the regime's ability to deliver on its part of the contract, which drove some social groups to demand that political and economic rights and freedoms be restored.

The first popular mobilization against Nasser occurred in February and October of 1968 and was provoked by the lenient sentences handed down to the officers held responsible for the defeat in the June 1967 war against Israel. In response, Nasser issued the "30th of March Declaration" in which he called for introducing democratic elections within the ruling party, and for drafting a new constitution that guaranteed political and security rights and defined the three branches of government. However, given the need to rebuild the Armed Forces and to engage in an extended war of attrition with Israel, these reforms were never implemented during Nasser's lifetime.

By the time of his death, Nasser had successfully transformed the Egyptian state from an oligarchic regime to a populist authoritarian one. The populist authoritarian regime created by Nasser was legitimized by a ruling bargain: economic development, social justice, and national independence in return for political loyalty. However, the 1967 defeat dealt a severe blow to the Nasser regime and put this bargain into question. After the 1967 war, many groups previously allied to the regime such as students and workers began to mobilize against it demanding the restoration of political rights and freedoms.

Hybrid Authoritarianism under Sadat and Mubarak

After the 1973 War, Sadat sought to consolidate his own legitimacy, to weaken his Nasserist and leftist opponents, and to set himself apart from his predecessor by reorienting Egyptian politics in a more pro-Western and liberal direction. To achieve these objectives, he needed to forge a new ruling coalition loyal to him and to his new policies. By overseeing a partial liberalization of politics and the economy, Sadat was able to win the support of the Egyptian bourgeoisie and of western powers.

Under Sadat, the Egyptian regime thus shifted away from a populist authoritarian to a post-populist authoritarian or hybrid regime. This type of regime allowed for a greater measure of autonomous political, social, and economic activity while keeping in place many of the populist and corporatist measures instituted by Nasser.

In the second half of the 1970s, Sadat adopted a number of policies aimed at liberalizing the political and economic spheres. He dissolved the Arab Socialist Union and created a new ruling party loyal to him (the Egypt Party which was later renamed the National Democratic Party or NDP). He restored—although in a controlled manner—opposition parties and social and political movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood. He extended greater freedoms to the media and civil society organizations and encouraged foreign investment and private enterprise, but also put controls on them. Yet Sadat also continued Nasser's populist policies such as subsidies, government employment, and free higher education thereby ensuring the continued acquiescence of the lower and urban middle classes.

This dual strategy which combined elements of liberalism with elements of populist authoritarianism ensured Sadat's continued control of the populist coalition forged by his predecessor while also earning him the loyalty of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, which had grown increasingly outspoken against the constraints imposed by the Nasser regime on political and economic life. This strategy also allowed the regime to balance the interests of different social groups against one another and prevented newly established opposition parties and movements from mobilizing the support of the lower classes, the middle class, and the private sector bourgeoisie—all of whom had been co-opted by the regime in one way or another.

Upon assuming power in 1981, Mubarak expanded and institutionalized the hybrid regime established by Sadat. On the political front, the ruling NDP continued to maintain its two-thirds majority in a rubber stamp legislature while power remained largely concentrated in the office of the presidency and of the executive. Opposition parties continued to increase in number but remained weak and marginal, largely as a result of a restrictive laws and systematic election fraud.

In spite of periodic crackdowns, the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious movements such as the Salafi movement grew in size and power, and continued to expand their control over a large number of mosques, schools, businesses, and charitable organizations. Other segments of civil society such as business associations and human rights and development NGOs also continued to grow and thrive under the Mubarak regime. Similarly, the size of the media expanded significantly especially with the spread of opposition parties and private newspapers. Moreover, the introduction of satellite TV and the internet greatly diversified access to information and undermined the ability of the regime to control what citizens watched, read, and listened to.

On the economic front, Mubarak maintained important aspects of the bargain established under Nasser's era of populist authoritarianism, through maintaining a very large number of civil servants—whose number had reached approximately seven million by the end of his tenure—and by maintaining subsidies on essential items such as bread and energy. In fact, the wage and subsidies bill constituted half of all government expenditure during Mubarak's rule.

On the other hand, Mubarak also did away with other aspects of the bargain. Starting the early 1990s, upon signing on to an economic reform and structural adjustment program with the IMF, the Mubarak regime undertook a privatization program which led to a significant reduction in the size of the public sector and in the number of public sector employees (as opposed to civil servants). Mubarak also reduced government expenditures by reducing spending on essential social services such as education, healthcare, public transport, and housing, as well as removing rent controls on agricultural land and on housing, which had once protected the middle class.

Also under Mubarak, the size of the private sector and its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) expanded significantly. Moreover, the private sector elite expanded their political influence by assuming leading positions within the ruling NDP, and by acquiring a greater share of seats in parliament and holding ministerial positions. The last government cabinet before the ouster of Mubarak was dominated by businessmen with close connections to the ruling party and to Gamal Mubarak, who aspired to succeed his aging father.

The hybrid formula maintained by Sadat and Mubarak succeeded to a large extent in stabilizing the post-populist authoritarian regime in Egypt for almost four decades. In fact, Egypt seemed to defy a projection made by many political scientists that liberalized autocracy or limited liberalization would eventually give way to full democratization or full autocracy. Both Sadat and Mubarak were able to sustain this hybrid formula by on the one hand maintaining important aspects of Nasser's populist bargain, and on the other hand by relying on selective liberalization/repression, divide-and- rule strategies, access to external rents, and to extensive borrowing externally and internally.

January 25 and the Crisis of the Hybrid State

By the end of Mubarak's reign, the "hybrid regime" began to unravel. The growing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small group of business elite led to growing discontent within the ranks of the old guard in the military and the state bureaucracy. The old guard felt their political and economic fortunes relatively decline. The final years of Mubarak's rule saw the emergence of a power struggle between the old guard led by the military and NDP apparatchiks on the one hand and the new guard, which represented the new elite associated with Gamal Mubarak. The outcome of that struggle hinged on the question of succession.

Moreover, the growth of the private sector led to the emergence of a new urban middle class that aspired to greater political and economic independence from the state and that felt entitled to a greater say in the decision-making process. The state's growing dependence on taxation as a source of government revenue created new pressures for greater representation. Such pressures were felt in the emergence of a more assertive civil society sector, a more independent media, and new protest movements such as the Kefaya and April 6 movements, and also in the attempts to establish more independent political parties. Demands for political and democratic reforms began to gain greater currency, culminating for example in the emergence of a popular campaign to support the candidacy of Mohamed ElBaradei to the presidential elections.

Even civil servants who were considered the principal beneficiaries of the welfare policies of the Mubarak regime saw their fortunes shrink as a result of declining wages, rising prices, and worsening social services. They too began to voice their discontent

through protest actions and activism. The protests of real estate tax collectors was the most prominent example of activism by civil servants under Mubarak.

Labor protest also proliferated in the final years of Mubarak's rule. Starting with the protests by textile workers in Mahalla in 2008, an unprecedented wave of labor activism swept the country with workers in the public and private sectors calling for better pay, better working conditions, and the right to form independent trade unions that represented their interests rather than those of the state.

Finally, the decline of social spending and the growing exclusion of the middle and lower classes created a vacuum which Islamic movements such as the Brotherhood and the Salafi movement filled by establishing an extensive network of mosques and NGOs that provided much-needed educational and health services to the lower middle classes and the poor. The state—which realized the importance of the welfare functions performed by the Islamic welfare sector—largely turned a blind eye and allowed Islamist organizations to spread across the country and to eventually build up a formidable social movement.

And so, the final years of Mubarak's rule saw growing turmoil both within the ruling regime and between the state and various social actors. The ouster of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali from Tunisia on January 10, 2011 had the effect of bringing various struggles to the fore. A demonstration planned by a number of youth movements to protest police brutality on Police Day in Egypt quickly snowballed into a mass protest, which the police was unable to quell. On the evening of January 28, the military led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or SCAF assumed effective control over the country, eventually forcing Mubarak to resign on February 11, 2011, and bringing four decades of post-populist authoritarian rule to an end.

The two years following the ouster of Mubarak were regarded as a failed transition to democracy in Egypt. Democratic elections in 2012 resulted in the rise of Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood to power. The ascendance of Islamists provoked a full-fledged social crisis. The upper class, the state bureaucracy, women and Copts, and secular Egyptians united in rejecting the Islamists' agenda and in supporting the military overthrow of the first elected Egyptian president, Mohammed Morsi, on July 3, 2013. Moreover, attempts by the SCAF, and subsequently by the Muslim Brotherhood, and by El-Sisi's regime to appease the various social and economic grievances through increased government and social spending had the effect of provoking an economic crisis that came to a head in the fall of 2016.

Bureaucratic Authoritarianism and El-Sisi

Under General El-Sisi, who led the military movement to oust Morsi and was subsequently elected president in June 2014, the Egyptian regime underwent a transition

to bureaucratic authoritarianism. Bureaucratic authoritarian regimes, as described by Henrique Cardoso and Guillermo O'Donnell in the seminal volume, *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, share a number of features. They are led by the military and usually come to power through a military coup against the backdrop of deep social and economic crises that threaten the very existence of the capitalist state and the dominance of the bourgeoisie. They are based on a narrow alliance between the military and the bourgeoisie, and their primary objectives are to restore social order and to stabilize the economy. The bureaucratic authoritarian state thus involves the suspension of the economic and political rights of large segments of the population, a task which requires the use of coercive and repressive measures on a broad scale. Finally, such regimes often enjoy external support from transnational corporations and foreign powers that fear the rise of the lower classes.

Bureaucratic authoritarian regimes emerged in Latin America (Chile, Brazil, and Argentina), in southern Europe (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), and in Asia (South Korea and Indonesia) at a time when the communist threat in these parts of the world was high. Military juntas in alliance with the bourgeoisie and foreign powers installed repressive regimes that sought to restore social order and stabilize the economy by oppressively demobilizing communist forces and their allies.

The Egyptian regime under El-Sisi embodies many of the characteristics of these regimes: El-Sisi led a military movement supported by the upper class and segments of the middle class to oust the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies from power after a period of extended political, social, and economic turmoil.

Upon assuming power, the El-Sisi regime sought to demobilize all opposition through a number of measures. First there came an unprecedented crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, which began with the violent dispersal of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins, resulting in the death of hundreds of Islamist activists and dozens of police officers. This was followed by an extensive campaign which targeted not only the political leaders of the movement, but also its extensive network of social and educational, and economic Islamist institutions, which the regime had previously tolerated.

The effort to demobilize the opposition also extended to elements of the secular opposition, which also came under intense pressure by the regime. These included the youth activists who played a prominent role during the January 25 uprising. They became the focus of a restrictive anti-protest law that effectively ended the cycle of mobilization which had reached its peak with the ouster of Mubarak. A series of regulatory institutions also circumscribed the relatively open media space that had existed for the better part of the last decade. Civil society organizations became subject to new legislation that restricted the ability of NGOs to receive foreign funding outside of the scrutiny of the state. Finally, the legislative elections produced a

fragmented parliament that was effectively aligned with the regime at the same time that the regime managed to exert considerable influence over the judiciary through the retirement of a large number of judges suspected of having sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood.

After accomplishing the task of restoring social order and quelling all opponents within the first two years of his rule, El-Sisi undertook a second task characteristic of bureaucratic authoritarian regimes, which is to restructure the economy. The regime had adopted populist economic policies during its first two years in power with the aim of stabilizing his regime politically while weakening opponents. These policies were financed primarily through funding from the Gulf states and by spending from the country's reserves. However, the rise of foreign debt, the drying up of foreign reserves, and a severe economic recession triggered an economic crisis in 2016.

Consequently, El-Sisi's regime signed a reform agreement with the IMF in 2016, which constituted the most ambitious attempt to date to dismantle the welfare state in Egypt. In one fell swoop, the Egyptian pound was devalued by more than half of its value, causing an unprecedented inflation and rise in prices that took a toll on the lower and middle classes. Energy subsidies were also removed, causing a rise in gasoline prices, utility bills, and public transportation. Finally, a new VAT tax was imposed on all goods and services. Notably, few of the reforms in question were targeted at the elite, who constituted the regime's primary support base and possibly the primary beneficiary of these policies in the long run.

By dismantling the welfare state introduced by Nasser and maintained in some important respects by Sadat and Mubarak, the regime did away with the primary basis of legitimacy of the authoritarian rule in Egypt, namely patronage and co-optation. Instead, it resorted to creating a new basis of legitimacy, which El-Sisi himself has labeled the legitimacy of delegation or *sharyiat al-tafweed*. That means, in rough terms, assuming a savior role after being called upon to rescue the nation from political, economic, and social turmoil. Certainly, the regime has presented the events of June 30, 2013 and their aftermath leading up to the presidential elections of 2014 and 2018 as moments when the Egyptian people have risen to delegate the president to save Egypt from itself and from domestic and foreign conspirators.

Two Opposing Authoritarian Regimes

Though the El-Sisi and Nasser regimes seem similar in many ways, namely in the extreme concentration of power in the hands of the president and the military, in the demobilization of opposition forces, and near-complete state control over political and civil life, these two regimes nonetheless constitute two distinct, and perhaps opposing, types of authoritarianism.

Nasser instituted a populist distributive regime that relied on welfare and populist reforms. In contrast, El-Sisi has established a bureaucratic authoritarian regime with the aim of demobilizing the middle and lower classes and dismantling the welfare state established by Nasser. Though their style of governing may seem similar, these two regimes had very distinct and opposing objectives, which may affect their long-term viability. Populism and post-populism in Egypt endured because they were based on a sprawling welfare state able to co-opt various social groups. The bureaucratic authoritarianism of the current regime is likely to be more tenuous, especially if it succeeds in accomplishing its primary objectives of restoring social peace and jumpstarting the economy. Once these tasks are achieved, the regime's basis of support might become less reliable as Egyptians demand greater social and political freedoms.