

November 2014

## A new authoritarian regime in Egypt? Controlling power and eliminating dissent

Dina El Khawaga \*

**Egyptian President Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi has succeeded in overcoming international and regional challenges to consolidate the new regime. Will this give an impetus to fresh suppression of the remaining forms of resistance and peaceful opposition in Egypt?**

In late September 2014, Egypt saw an unprecedented mobilization of the state's financial and human resources to support and publicize the visit of President Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi to the USA, where he participated in the work of the UN General Assembly to build an international alliance against terrorism represented by Islamic State forces in Syria and Iraq. The visit was seen as the culmination of a process of international recognition for the new Egyptian political regime, and the start of a process of building alliances with international partners. Despite the start of aerial bombardment of armed jihadist positions in Syria and Iraq prior to an official resolution to launch military operations, the Egyptian media promoted one sole discourse: that the Egyptian government's strategic vision had succeeded internationally and the international community, represented in the UN, was now convinced of the need to ensure security and fight terrorism. The Egyptian media reminded the world that this policy had been advocated ever since the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood President in June 2013. Thus, inside Egypt, the President's visit to the US settled the balance of power in favor of the new regime, which had faltered for almost a year in its attempts to win recognition and support from the international community. The international and "revolutionary" legitimacy of Sisi was confirmed. The visit also rekindled Egyptian-American détente after a year of cool military and economic relations.

Regardless of the obvious discrepancies between the Egyptian and Western versions of the visit (with exaggeration in the Egyptian media of the importance of Egypt's role or the power of Egyptian-American détente), it marked a turning point for the international relations of the emerging political regime. The resumption of US military support to Egypt, and the potential injection of American investment to support the Egyptian regime during a time of financial crisis, is important for the regime. The regime appeared to have been given a green light to continue with its "corrective operation" of the democratic path that Egypt had embarked upon after the January 2011 revolution. This raises questions about future measures that may be taken by the regime to complete the so-called "roadmap" and consolidate its legitimacy using all possible means. We also need to understand the tools being used to create a new authoritarian regime capable of social control, institutional intimidation, and greater terrorism than that used by the Mubarak regime against the January revolution. Finally, we need to reassess the extent to which international public opinion can exercise political pressure against the violations committed by the Egyptian political regime against domestic freedom, the right to self-expression and the room to maneuver of Egyptian civil society that is attempting to hold the regime accountable for its security and political actions.

The international factors that had put pressure on the regime over the last year, restraining its strict security measures, may be transformed into a source of support once President Sisi is accepted as an ally in the international coalition against Islamic State, and as one of the most

\* Program Director, Arab Reform Initiative

significant parties in the fight against terrorism in the region. President Sisi will likely rely on improved relations with the international community to consolidate a new authoritarian regime that can rein in freedom of expression and organization that emerged following the January 2011 revolution. The last four months of 2014 appear to be the final episode in the process of consolidating the so-called June 30 revolution against the protests of the Muslim Brotherhood and the possible escalation of violence, as well as against the remaining vestiges of resistance against authority. Resistance will be constrained, whether by revolutionary forces, by organized civil society groups and human rights organizations, or by the political maneuvers of elite opposition parties that still have limited popularity.

Any observer of the Egyptian scene cannot but notice the escalation in efforts to “tighten the grip of the authorities” at four parallel levels. First, the procedures used by the security services to detain the political opposition have resulted in an unprecedented 40,000 detainees. More than 200 prisoners are on hunger strike to protest against the measures of the security services and the judicial system. The short-lived series of attempts to calmly meet prisoner demands by the Egyptian regime prior to Sisi’s visit to New York, has changed to indifference towards the health of those on hunger strike, some of them at risk of death with no offer of medical care.

Second, university administrations have engaged in incriminating all political activities by students and have dissolved most student unions and clubs. A new law for universities annuls the election of student leaders by the presidents of universities or deans of colleges. There were also decisions to permanently expel any student who “insults” the President, while a university lecturer involved in any act of violence or protest can be discharged without judicial review. Universities have expanded measures and requested “written pledges” from students and their families to refrain from participating in any acts of protest, whether violent or peaceful. The same procedures are followed when accepting students to live in university dorms, and there is even talk about instructing students to observe and monitor their classmates’ conduct and document and report any opposition.

Along with these two burning topics, there is a third explosive issue relating to the organization of the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in accordance with Law No. 84 of 1982. Civil society groups tried very hard to change this law and end the mandate and guardianship of the government over all forms of civil organizations, presenting more than one alternative draft law following the January revolution. The Social Solidarity Ministry decided to track down any organization that works as a consultation office or firm to circumvent this obstructive law. The Ministry also succeeded in amending the penal code to make the receipt of funding and grants for human rights activities a crime similar to that of funding for arms and terrorism. The sentence for such a crime was changed to a life sentence or death penalty, in addition to a fine of half a million Egyptian pounds. Following the amendment to the law, the Ministry granted NGOs up to the end of November to reorganize their affairs. After that date, human rights organizations may be prosecuted under the law.

The tight grip and restrictions are not limited to prisoners, students and human rights activists, but are about to be extended to a fourth category in a new law on parliamentary elections and the redistribution of electoral constituencies to guarantees wealthy elites a stronger chance of winning in the next elections. The changes will blatantly restrict the possibilities of success for any opposition coalition with voting weight in the parliament, including the coalition of former Foreign Minister Amro Musa, who headed the writing of the most recent Egyptian constitution, or the coalition headed by Ahmad Shafiq, former prime minister and presidential candidate in 2012. Both these figures have failed so far to mobilize popular support that would allow them to stand significantly in the next elections, to be held before the end of 2014.

Merging these steps together, and in light of the political implications since the return of the President from New York, an escalation of the “tight grip” may be anticipated. These steps represent specific models for the building of a new authoritarian regime that far exceeds the oppression experienced in Egypt during the reign of President Mubarak. The emergence of political pluralism, even to a limited extent, will be prevented for the foreseeable future. The more dangerous aspect is that it seems that the West might bless – or at least close an eye to – these restrictive measures as an “acceptable” price for the participation of the Egyptian regime in the international war against terrorism.

The coming few months will likely see the reproduction of the 1990s era and will prove, once again, that Western regimes will be lenient in dealing with authoritarian regimes in the region in return for support for their policy on international security and fighting terrorism. The recent visit of Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi to the US will break new ground in easy regime efforts to deal with political and human rights protests, pursue broader action to criminalize all forms of resistance, and isolate the opposition. This may lead to the emergence of new forms and patterns of radical resistance by Islamists, the left-wing, or even by civil society activists.

The enforcement of new authoritarianism prior to the donor conference in February 2015 may allow President Sisi to consolidate his power and halt political and social mobilization, but at a high cost in attacking each group separately. Of course, the tight security can be eased prior to the donor conference to indicate a political concession to appease international public opinion. No one can yet discern if we are facing a full-fledged military authoritarian regime, or simply one round in a series of political compromises exhibited in Sisi style to gradually flip the balance of powers following the constitutional declaration of 2013 that ended the Arab Spring movement.

### **About the author**

Dina El Khawaga is Program Director with the Arab Reform Initiative, where she manages the Arab Research Support Program (ARSP) and the social movements program. She is a tenured professor at Cairo University.

She is an expert of higher education policies and knowledge production processes in the Arab region and civil society dynamics. Dina El Khawaga has previously worked in both Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations as a program officer and a regional director. Her current focus is on social movements, collective actions and the various forms of contentious politics that took place after the Arab uprisings. She also manages the Arab Research Support Program at ARI, funded by OSF and Carnegie Foundation.

---

### **About ARI**

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is a consortium of policy analysis institutes that mobilizes research capacity to advance knowledge and nurture home-grown programs for democratic reform in the Arab world. ARI seeks to generate, facilitate, and disseminate knowledge by and for Arab societies. In the quest to build free, just and democratic societies, ARI focuses on the current revolutionary processes in the Arab world, on the new patterns of interaction between political forces, governments and societies, on today's political, socio-economic and cultural transformations, and on social justice. It opens a space for diverse voices and brings in the key actors in the transformation processes at play: intellectuals, activists, women, civil society representatives, human rights groups, social movements, political parties, the private sector and the media. ARI produces policy research, supports networks of young scholars, convenes policy dialogues and organizes regional platforms on critical issues related to the transition processes.

[www.arab-reform.net](http://www.arab-reform.net)

---

The Arab Reform Initiative does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Initiative, its staff or its board. Copyright of this publication is held by the Arab Reform Initiative. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the Arab Reform Initiative.

©Arab Reform Initiative November 2014