

# “Don’t Listen to Anyone But Me!” Will al-Sisi Consolidate Military Rule in Egypt?

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The Egyptian military has played a pivotal political role ever since the Nasserist coup of 1952 (Koehler, 2016a). While overt military influence receded as Egypt morphed from Nasser’s ‘military society’ (Abdel-Malek, 1968) into Sadat’s and Mubarak’s ‘officers’ republic’ (Sayigh, 2012), the military elite continued to wield considerable political influence. As Steven Cook put it, the generals were ‘Ruling but not Governing’ (Cook, 2007), as military disengagement from politics went along with the expansion of the military’s economic interests, as well as with the provision of post-retirement careers to Egyptian officers in the public sector or state agencies at the central or governorate level (Bou Nassif, 2013; Sayigh, 2012).

The 2011 uprising has disrupted the political-military balance in Egypt, and not least the relationship between the military and civilian security sector. Faced with the mass uprising of early 2011, Egypt’s military elite failed to intervene on behalf of Mubarak (Koehler, 2016b). Instead, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (*al-Maglis al-A’la li-l-Quwwat al-Musalaha*, SCAF) dominated the early post-Mubarak period from behind the scene. Following renewed mass mobilization, the generals finally returned to power in a military coup that deposed Egypt’s first freely elected president, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Muhammad Mursi, on July 3, 2013.

Holger Albrecht and Dina Bishara have argued that the Egyptian military were ‘Back on Horseback’ as a result of the 2011 uprising (Albrecht &

Bishara, 2011; Finer, 1962). To built on the metaphor, however, rather than leading the charge, the SCAF under Tantawi stumbled, fell, and landed on horseback in 2011. Following an interim period in which the military attempted (and failed) to manage politics from behind the scenes, al-Sisi's new regime represents an attempt to tighten the saddle straps.

These attempts have so far had limited success. Despite the fact that the new leadership will soon complete its third year in power, indiscriminate repression of perceived 'enemies of the state' continues unabated. Such tactics extends far beyond the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamists to include journalists, students, academics, and activists of all stripes. In fact, repression under al-Sisi has taken on traits of uncontrolled and indiscriminate state violence. Secondly, al-Sisi has thus far failed to develop dependable support structures. Hesitant to align himself with any particular institution or group, al-Sisi has cultivated a vague nationalist ideology that equates his leadership with stability and the protection of the Egyptian state. Beneath the rhetoric, however, al-Sisi appears to exert little real control over the various branches of the state, including the security apparatus, individual ministries, and the newly elected parliament.

This paper takes a closer look at these issues. Examining processes of exclusion and inclusion, I argue that the current regime's emphasis on 'supporting the state' is unlikely to deliver on its main promise, political stability. Indiscriminate repression of unprecedented ferocity combined with the absence of credible institutionalized support is likely to lead into escalation. In other words, al-Sisi's rhetoric of protecting the Egyptian state might well produce a challenge to the very state it is meant to safeguard.

## **Repression and Support Building**

That political regimes do not survive on repression alone is commonplace among students of authoritarian regimes (Schlumberger, 2007). Egypt has witnessed unprecedented levels of repression since the return to power of its military elite in July 2013. While Islamists and especially the Muslim Brotherhood have borne the brunt of repression, this strategy—to borrow from Eberhard Kienle's characterization of illiberal policies in the 1990s—has been 'more than a response to Islamism' (Kienle, 1998). In fact, state repression has targeted activists of all stripes, from human rights defenders to journalists, from academics to artists and intellectuals.

At the same time, there have been attempts to institutionalize support for the new regime. Such strategies are most visible in the 2015 parliamentary elections. In parallel to the regime's exclusionary tactics, inclusion and support building has similarly failed to bear fruits. Despite attempts by the state, and the security services more particularly, to control the parliamentary elections, the new assembly remains unruly. The regime's failure to control parliament even in the absence of organized opposition illustrates its struggle to consolidate dependable support more generally.

The following sections first tackle the state's exclusionary strategies with a particular emphasis on the degree to which repression has empowered domestic security forces to such an extent that they at least partially elude the control of the center. Building on these observations, I then turn to an analysis of support building strategies, drawing on evidence mainly from the 2015 parliamentary elections.

## The Return of the Police State

The repression of dissent in Egypt since July 2013 represents a return of the police under the protection of the military. As Yezid Sayigh explains, after July 3, 2013, a "police state harsher in its repression and more hegemonic politically in comparison to the Mubarak era has been reconstituting itself under military suzerainty. Increasingly draconian laws, hypernationalist discourse, and the expanding role of the security sector and armed forces in all aspects of civilian life herald an even more authoritarian political order based on broader societal acceptance of the repressive practices of the state's coercive apparatus" (Sayigh, 2015, p. 7).

This repressive strategy has a number of different dimensions. On the one hand, there is a sustained campaign of repression against any type of activism. Data on detentions collected by the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights lists more than 40,000 cases of detentions between July 2013 and May 2014 alone.<sup>1</sup> During 2015, moreover, the Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence—now threatened by closure itself—has documented 474 cases of deaths caused by security forces, 137 of which occurred in custody.<sup>2</sup> According to reports by human rights activists, the use of military courts against civilians has further expanded after the ouster of Mursi, and especially following Presidential Decree 136 of October 27, 2014, which expanded the list of crimes for which civilians could be tried in military courts to include attacks on public property and the blocking of roads. At the same time, enforced disappearances have become commonplace in Egypt, as highlighted most recently by the case of the Italian researcher Giulio Regeni.<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon goes far beyond this specific case, however. Between August and November 2015, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms has documented 340 cases of enforced disappearances, an average of almost three cases per day.<sup>4</sup>

While policing was fundamentally unconstrained by legal rules under

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<sup>1</sup>See the full data here.

<sup>2</sup>See Markaz al-Nadeem, 'Hisad al-qahr fi 'am 2015 [Harvest of Repression in 2015],' no date. (click here for source). The Nadeem Center has meanwhile been threatened with closure by the Ministry of Health, citing unspecified violations (click here for source).

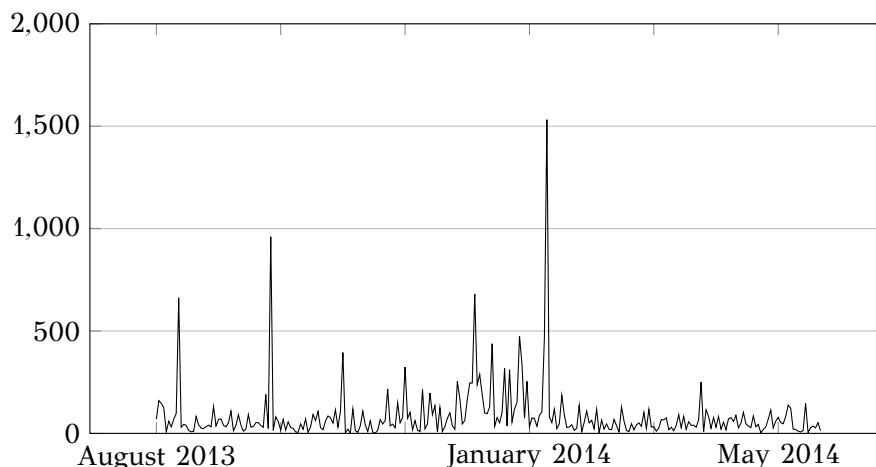
<sup>3</sup>See La Repubblica, "Giulio Regeni torturato perché pensavano che fosse una spia," February 8, 2016, (click here for source); also see New York Times, "Death of Student, Giulio Regeni, Highlights Perils for Egyptians, Too," February 12, 2016, (click here for source).

<sup>4</sup>See Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, "al-Mukhtafun Qasiran: Fi-l-Intithar Ansaf al-'Adala," page 7, (unpublished report).

Mubarak due to the continuous application of a state of emergency, many of the relevant provisions have since been translated into regular laws. The protest law signed by interim president Adly Mansour in November 2013, for example, gives sweeping powers to the Interior Ministry in what practically amounts to a ban on demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> Human rights organizations have strongly criticized the anti-terrorism law of August 2015 as well, citing its excessively broad definition of terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, repression has specifically targeted persons and organizations suspected of activities revolving around the January 25 Revolution. As Figure 1 demonstrates, following the massive arrest wave surrounding the violent dispersal of the pro-MB sit-ins in August 2013 in the context of which at least 800 people were killed<sup>7</sup> and about 10,000 arrested, repression remained at a high level and peaked in January 2014 around the anniversary of the January 25 Revolution.

Figure 1: Arrests by Day, Mid August 2013 to May 2014



Note: This figure starts after the massive wave of arrests following the dispersal of the Rabaa al-Adawiya and Nahda Square protest camps. Data from Wiki Thawra.

While we lack systematic data after May 2014, the following two revolutionary anniversaries saw similar levels of repression. In January 2016,

<sup>5</sup>Law 107 of 2013, see the English translation here.

<sup>6</sup>Law 94 of 2015, see Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Counterterrorism Law Erodes Basic Rights,” August 19, 2015, (click here for source), also see Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “The New Counterterrorism Law: Another Blow to the Constitution, Encourages Extra Judicial Killings,” August 2015, (click here for source).

<sup>7</sup>See Amy Austin Holmes, ‘Why Egypt’s Military Orchestrated a Massacre,’ Monkey Cage, August 22, 2014,(click here for source).

the Egyptian security forces orchestrated a massive raid in downtown Cairo, including around 5,000 apartments and targeting known activists, foreigners suspected of ‘inciting protests,’ as well as ordinary residents.<sup>8</sup> As a source in the security services told Reuters, these indiscriminate tactics were meant ‘to ensure activists don’t have breathing space and are unable to gather.’<sup>9</sup> Predictably, the 5th anniversary of the January Revolution—officially re-branded national Police Day as in the days of Mubarak—did not see major demonstrations.

Apart from repressive measures aimed at controlling activists and re-establishing a barrier of fear, legal changes have strengthened the domestic security forces and have contributed to a culture of impunity. Under the new constitution in force since January 2014, a ‘supreme police council’ established by Article 207 gives the interior ministry effective influence over legislation pertaining to the police, and an amendment to the Police Authority Law by presidential decree 9 October 2014 stipulates that crimes committed by police can only be tried in front of military courts.<sup>10</sup>

There are important indications that repression in Egypt goes beyond harsh, yet targeted exclusion. Incidents in which police officers arbitrarily detain, abuse, sometimes even kill ordinary citizens abound. Cases such as those of Talaat Shabeeb, a man whose death in police custody sparked protest in Luxor November 2015,<sup>11</sup> of Muhammad Sayed, a driver shot by a police officer in Cairo’s Darb al-Ahmar district in February 2016,<sup>12</sup> or of four-year-old boy Ahmad Mansour Karni who was accidentally sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court<sup>13</sup> are almost daily occurrences. The ill-treatment of doctors by police officers sparked strikes and major demonstrations by medics,<sup>14</sup> and police violations were even discussed in parliament, although no resolutions were adopted.<sup>15</sup> President al-Sisi has repeatedly reacted to such events, promising that ‘individual’ perpetrators would be brought to justice.<sup>16</sup> Such reactions, however, are indicative

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<sup>8</sup>See The Guardian, ‘Egyptian police raid Cairo homes as country prepares to mark 2011 uprising,’ January 22, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>9</sup>See Reuters, ‘Egypt: who’s afraid of January 25?,’ January 21, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>10</sup>See the unofficial English translation of the 2014 constitution here; see the database of presidential decrees maintained by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy here.

<sup>11</sup>Egyptian Chronicles, ‘Protest in Luxor over Police Brutality: Back to Old Times,’ 28 November, 2015 (click here for source).

<sup>12</sup>Egyptian Streets, ‘Egyptian Policeman Arrested for Shooting Dead 24-Year-Old Driver,’ February 19, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>13</sup>Egyptian Streets, ‘Was a Four-Year-Old Really Sentenced to Life in Prison in Egypt?’ February 21, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>14</sup>The Guardian, ‘Thousands of doctors in Egypt protest after police accused of attack on two medics,’ February 13, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>15</sup>Al-Ahram Online, ‘Egypt parliament divided over police reforms,’ February 21, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>16</sup>Mada Masr, ‘Sisi promises legal changes to tackle ‘individual’ police violations,’ February 19, 2016 (click here for source), also see al-Ahram Online, ‘Seven Egyptian policemen face charges of ‘incitement against police’,’ February 21, 2016 (click here for source).

of a lack of control on the part of the political center. In other words, while heightened levels of repression are not uncommon in consolidating authoritarian regimes, the Egyptian leadership under Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi seems at the verge of losing control of its own repressive apparatus.<sup>17</sup>

## Failed Inclusion

While repression in Egypt aims at excluding perceived ‘enemies of the state’ from political activities, the regime has so far not succeeded in rallying its supporters. The 2015 parliamentary elections are instructive in this regard. While the secular (let alone Islamist) opposition was largely absent from the contest, the disparate group of ‘supporters of the state’ which dominated the elections and the resulting parliament proved no less difficult to control.

There were attempts to institutionalize support in the run-up to the elections. Kamal al-Ganzouri, a former prime minister under both Mubarak and the SCAF, had been active in rallying support for an electoral coalition in anticipation of the elections since June 2014. In early February 2015, however, al-Ganzouri’s coalition disintegrated over allegations that he had not given appropriate weight to candidates of the Egyptian Front (*al-Gabha al-Masriya*), a coalition of Mubarak-era parties and pro military politicians led by former presidential candidate Ahmad Shafiq.<sup>18</sup> Just days before this event, President al-Sisi had called upon party leaders to form a single political front which he promised to then support.<sup>19</sup>

On February 4, 2015, a number of prominent former members of al-Ganzouri’s coalition came together to heed this call and to found a new group called *Fi Hob Masr* (For the Love of Egypt, FLE). The group was led by former military intelligence general Sameh Saif al-Yazal and included figures such as Gebaly al-Maghrabi, head of the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (ETUF), Ahmad Saeed, a former president of the Free Egyptians Party (*al-Hizb al-Masriyin al-Ahrar*, FEP), Emad Gad, a prominent former member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (*al-Hizb al-Masri al-Dimuqrati al-Iqtima’i*, ESDP), as well as Muhammad Badran, president of the Future of the Homeland Party (*Mustaqbal al-Watan*, FHP) and Muhammad Badr, founder of the *tamarod* movement which had mobilized anti-MB protests in June 2013.<sup>20</sup>

According to liberal politician and FLE founding member Hazem Abd al-Azim, the presidential palace coordinated the foundation of the coalition.

<sup>17</sup>See Aya Nader, ‘Insecurity under Egypt’s ‘Security Forces’,’ *Open Democracy*, February 21, 2016 (click here for source) and Jared Malsin, ‘The Sentencing of a Toddler Shows How Out of Control Egypt’s Security State has Become,’ *Time Magazine*, February 26, 2016 (click here for source).

<sup>18</sup>Al-Shurouq, ‘Al-Ganzouri yu’alin itizal al-siyasiya khilal ayam’ [al-Ganzouri announces withdrawal from politics within days], February 5, 2015.

<sup>19</sup>See Daily News Egypt, ‘Al-Sisi calls for ‘1 political coalition’ in meeting with political party leaders,’ January 13, 2015.

<sup>20</sup>Dot Masr, ‘Shakhsiyat ‘ama tadshin qa’imat “Fi Hob Masr”’ [Public Figures Launch For the Love of Egypt List], February 4, 2015.

Abd al-Azim alleged that the presidential palace was behind the initiative to form FEL and that a meeting was held in the General Intelligence Service (GIS) headquarters on February 3, 2015, in which the foundation of the coalition was agreed.<sup>21</sup> While Abd al-Azim was strongly attacked by other members of the coalition for his statements,<sup>22</sup> it is clear that FLE has been supported by the state and was set up in order to organize support in the 2015 parliamentary elections.<sup>23</sup>

FLE thus predictably dominated the list-component of the 2015 contest.<sup>24</sup> The particular electoral system used in the list component, a version of bloc voting by which the strongest party would win all available seats in a constituency, allowed FLE to sweep the list component and win all 120 seats. Due to the withdrawal of competing lists in the East Delta constituency, FLE ran unopposed there and won all 15 seats.

On the parliamentary level, however, FLE proved to be a paper tiger. Although three of its component parties, the Free Egyptians Party (FEP), the Future of the Homeland Party (FHP), and al-Wafd, are the three strongest parties in the new parliament with 65, 53, and 36 seats, respectively, the assembly remains dominated by independent candidates (351 seats). What is more, attempts to transform FLE into a parliamentary bloc have failed. While a number of FLE members have joined the Supporting Egypt Coalition (*I'tilaf da'm masr*, SEC),<sup>25</sup> the FEP and al-Wafd have refused to join. In fact, FEP spokesperson Shehab Wageeh referred to the SEC as the “new National Democratic Party” and affirmed that his party had refused to play a part in setting up a new dominant political force.<sup>26</sup> The FHP initially declared its withdrawal as well, but eventually re-joined the SEC. Despite having attracted the support of a number of independent candidates, however, the SEC falls far short of controlling a two-thirds majority of MPs necessary to change the constitution.<sup>27</sup>

This issue became apparent when the new parliament was called upon to approve the decrees passed by the presidency in the absence of a legislature. Taken together, al-Sisi and interim president Adly Mansour had issued a

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<sup>21</sup>Mada Masr, ‘Hazem Abdel Azeem faces backlash following controversial testimonial on parliament,’ January 5, 2016. Abd al-Azim had published an online statement entitled ‘A Truthful Testimony on the President’s Parliament,’ which in the meantime has been removed.

<sup>22</sup>See for example Mustafa Bakri writing in al-Watan, ‘*Al-Khauna wa-l-tariq illa gihanam*’ [Traitors and the Road to Hell], January 3, 2016.

<sup>23</sup>A clear indication for state support is the fact that of all electoral lists or parties, FLE was the only one to be allowed to erect massive signs and banners on bridges and along roads in the outskirts of Cairo before the official start of the campaigning period.

<sup>24</sup>The 2015 elections were held under a parallel system. 120 members were elected through bloc voting in 4 list constituencies, while a further 448 were elected in single-member constituencies in a two-round system.

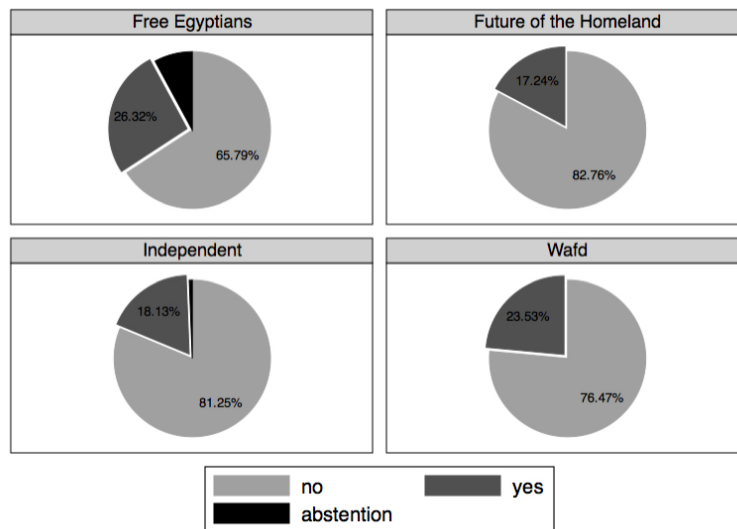
<sup>25</sup>The coalition was initially called Supporting the State but changed its name after criticism regarding its claim to speak for the regime in parliament.

<sup>26</sup>See the video posted on the FEP’s facebook page on December 21, 2015 (click here for source).

<sup>27</sup>See Mada Masr, ‘The impossible parliamentary alliance,’ December 21, 2015.

total of 341 presidential decrees between July 2013 and the parliamentary election of 2015. Once the new parliament had convened, it faced the mammoth task of reviewing these decrees within 15 days.<sup>28</sup> While most of the laws were approved, the civil service law was voted down 332 to 150 (111 abstentions) and became a notorious case that clearly demonstrated the regime's inability to effectively organize parliamentary majorities. As Figure 4 demonstrates, none of the major groups represented within FLE voted cohesively on the civil service law. Rather, a majority of all four potentially regime-supporting groups voted against the law and clear voting patterns remained elusive.

Figure 2: Voting Behavior of Major Groups on Civil Service Law



The difficulties in institutionalizing support point to a larger issue that is also visible in appointments to governorships. While al-Sisi has attempted to replace governors appointed under the rule of the MB with individuals loyal to the new regime, high turnover rates in this area since July 2013 suggest that support building was not successful there either. Taken together, attempts at support building have thus far not produced stability and have not led to the emergence of a new set of rules structuring political processes. Rather, the regime's unwillingness or inability to rally support around a clear agenda has meant that political control could not be established

<sup>28</sup>See Mai El-Sadany, '341 Laws in 15 Days: Parliament Reviews Presidential Decrees,' Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, February 3, 2016.



thus far—the absence of organized opposition and unprecedented levels of repression notwithstanding.

## Conclusion

Drawing in nationalist discourses and a rhetoric of ‘supporting the state,’ the Egyptian leadership around Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi has attempted to consolidate a new authoritarian regime in Egypt since 2013. These attempts have largely failed thus far. While harsh repression is succeeding in re-erecting a ‘barrier of fear,’ the momentum and popular support surrounding the coup against Mursi and the MB regime could not be translated into institutionalized support so far. Instead, repression has remained at a high level and is increasingly taking on forms of uncontrolled state violence. At the same time, despite the absence of organized opposition, the disparate group of ‘supporters of the state’ which populate the political scene in today’s Egypt could neither be disciplined by the center, nor could they be relied upon to lend their support to the regime by default.

These problems have not gone unnoticed by the Egyptian leadership. Rather than attempting to build identifiable support structures and targeting exclusion, however, al-Sisi continues to rely on vague nationalist rhetoric and indiscriminate repression. Al-Sisi’s most recent speech on February 24, 2016, in which he announced his agenda for the development of Egypt until the year 2030 illustrates the aimlessness of his leadership. Rather than presenting a clear way forward, al-Sisi suggested raising resources through SMS donations by Egyptian citizens and exhorted his listeners to listen to nobody but himself.<sup>29</sup> This strategy of consolidation means that in contemporary Egypt, everybody is a potential supporter and enemy of ‘the state’ at the same time, thus threatening to undermine what limited central control the regime has been able to exert. In the meantime, the country’s economy survives almost exclusively on Gulf money, and a massive currency depreciation is becoming increasingly more likely. In its current form, the al-Sisi regime is unlikely to survive politically should major challenges arise from the continuing deterioration of the economic situation.

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<sup>29</sup>Mada Masr, ‘Sisi: Don’t listen to anyone but me,’ February 24, 2016 (click here for source).

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