

Egyptian Dictator el-Sisi intensifies state repression

By Jean Shaoul
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Egypt's military dictator President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi has tightened his grip on power, removing potential rivals from his inner circle, as his tyrannical regime intensifies the crackdown on dissent.

It follows el-Sisi's second-term inauguration last month after March's sham election banned candidates critical of the regime.

The moves are in preparation for further International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed austerity measures aimed at enriching the military elite around him at the expense of Egypt's impoverished working class and peasants who are seething with discontent.

Adding to the explosive situation is the internecine in-fighting between rival factions of the military and intelligence circles, which have increased their already dominant position in the economy and political apparatus.

El-Sisi appointed Mustafa Madbouly as prime minister and 12 other cronies to head government departments, including defence, interior, trade, finance and agriculture. He selected his close friend, Lieutenant General Mohamed Ahmed Zaki, the head of the elite Republic Guard, as defence minister. He replaces Sedki Sobhi, a former head of the Egyptian armed forces, who was perceived as a potential rival. This brings to 33 the number of top military officials sacked by el-Sisi since July 2013.

It was Zaki who personally arrested Egypt's elected Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and his government during the 2013 coup that put el-Sisi in power.

The interior ministry has been given to Mahmoud Tawfik, former head of the domestic National Security Service. Mohamed Maait, the deputy finance minister, has been promoted to head the finance ministry, replacing Amr El Garhy, who was instrumental in initiating IMF-dictated austerity in 2016 in return for a \$12 billion bailout, when the country was all but bankrupt.

As part of that IMF deal, Egypt floated its currency, which soon lost half its value against the dollar, causing inflation to reach 33 percent in July 2017. In a country that imports much of its food, fuel and manufactured goods, prices are still rising—by 13.3 percent in March. As inflation has soared, the central bank raised interest rates to about 20 percent, making credit prohibitive under conditions where factories were working at 50 percent of their capacity.

With a budget deficit for 2017-18 of almost 10 percent of GDP, the government has introduced a value-added tax and multiple cuts to energy, petrol and basic food subsidies upon which 70 million people depend. In March, angry workers took to the streets of Minya, Desouk, the Imbaba suburb of Cairo, Giza and Alexandria to protest the latest cuts in bread subsidies.

In response Mohamed Mansour, a general in the security services, was seen on social media calling on people to “go hungry” and “sacrifice their dinners,” for the sake of the Egyptian economy.

Two weeks ago, the government announced further cuts to its electricity subsidies that will increase prices for factories by 42 percent and households by 21 percent.

Some 40 percent of Egypt's nearly 100 million people live on less than \$2 a day, while unemployment is rampant, particularly amongst youth. According to official statistics, youth unemployment in a country where more than 60 percent of the population is under 30 years of age is 26.7 percent; the real figure is no doubt far higher.

A new bankruptcy law—long demanded by investors—was adopted in January. The government also plans to sell stakes in several state-owned companies before the end of 2018.

Hikes in food prices and a nearly threefold increase in Cairo's metro fares again led to protests last month—under conditions in which demonstrations are

effectively banned—and clashes with the security forces during which 21 people were arrested.

El-Sisi has unleashed an extensive crackdown on all forms of dissent and political expression that far exceeds the worst excesses of Hosni Mubarak, who was overthrown by the mass uprising in February 2011. With more repression under way, his aim is to prevent another revolution.

The constitution is effectively a dead letter, with the country under a state of emergency supposedly to deal with “the dangers and funding of terrorism” in northern Sinai and the Delta area. All democratic norms have been jettisoned. Not only is torture in Egypt’s prisons widespread, the security forces have no hesitation in using lethal force against demonstrators in public. Prisons are being built to accommodate the more than 60,000 political prisoners, whose numbers are continually rising.

The last few weeks have witnessed a wave of detentions by the security forces, ostensibly for spreading false news, inciting against the state on social media or belonging to an “outlawed group.” The Muslim Brotherhood has disappeared from sight after el-Sisi’s massacre of 1,600 of its members and the imprisonment and forcible “disappearance” of thousands more following the 2013 coup. The detentions usually involve a dawn raid, a warrantless arrest, the confiscation of computers, books and phones, and cash.

Among those arrested were the satirical video blogger Shady Abu Zeid, leftist activists Shady Al-Ghazaly Harb, Amal Fathy, her husband and three-year-old-son, labour lawyer and member of the Revolutionary Socialists movement Haytham Mohamadeen, blogger and anti-torture activist Wael Abbas and Hazim Abdelazim, a prominent Egyptian opposition leader.

It was Abbas who, during the Mubarak era, published a video showing the police torture and sexual assault of microbus driver Imad al-Kabeer, which led to the conviction of the perpetrators in a landmark case in 2007. That inspired a wave of internet activism, which included the Facebook page “We Are all Khaled Saeid”. This commemorated Alexandrian victim Khaled Saeid, who was tortured and killed by the police in July 2010, sparking the mass protests that ousted Mubarak 18 days later.

Nothing is off limits for Egypt’s military junta. On June 5, the regime organised an attack by a gang of thugs on a Civil Democratic Movement’s iftar dinner party, breaking the daily fast during Ramadan. Dozens of politicians, writers and human rights activists were

attending the dinner when the thugs entered the club and overturned the dinner tables, shouting “Traitors! Spies!”

The press functions as the mouthpiece for the government. Last year, three members of the journalists’ syndicate were sentenced to two years in prison and researchers Ismail Alexandrani and Hesham Gaafar were indefinitely detained. The Committee to Protect Journalists ranks Egypt as the third worst country internationally for imprisoning journalists.

The government also banned television stars Ibrahim Eissa, Yousri Fouda, and Bassem Youssef, frozen the assets of activists and civil society leaders Hossam Bahgat and Gamal Eid, and closed dozens of news websites. Vast sums are expended on developing and installing online-monitoring systems to track public internet usage.

A new press and media bill is going through parliament that grants even more powers to the government. It uses vague wording about “hatred”, “incitement”, the supposed “threat to democracy” and a clampdown on pornography to muzzle independent journalism and block personal accounts on social networking sites.

All this has the tacit consent of the Trump administration, which—like the Obama administration—views the murderous regime as a custodian of its regional interests and part of its coalition against Iran.

Similarly, the European powers have no qualms about the junta’s brutality and lawlessness, as they scramble to secure lucrative arms contracts and oil and gas concessions in Egyptian waters.

European corporations such as BP, Eni, Dassault, and Siemens lobbied their governments not to criticise the el-Sisi regime. Britain is the largest non-Arab investor in Egypt, with oil giant BP signing a lucrative £7.8 billion investment deal in the Nile Delta. Siemens signed one of the largest contracts in its history to build power stations and wind turbines in Egypt, while France has clinched deals worth billions of euros for warships and fighter jets.

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