

Egypt: el-Sisi approves legal framework for military dictatorship

By Jean Shaoul
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Prefiguring the actions of Donald Trump in the United States, Egypt's blood-stained dictator General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi has approved amendments to emergency law granting himself and the armed forces additional powers.

The provisions provide the legal framework for a military dictatorship in the Arab world's most populous country, with el-Sisi at its head. They will ban—not just limit—all political opposition to the domination of the corporate, financial and military elite over economic and political life.

While presenting these measures as a means of combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, having seized power in a military coup in 2013 el-Sisi is preparing to suppress seething social discontent as the global recession, closures and curfews push the country's fragile economy into meltdown and its impoverished people into destitution.

Indifferent to the desperate conditions facing the country's 102 million population, the government did nothing to prepare for the pandemic despite Egypt being identified in early February as one of the African countries most at risk. Travel bans and lockdown measures were only imposed after dozens of workers on a Nile cruise ship in the southern city of Luxor tested positive for the disease in mid-March.

The International Food Policy Research Institute estimated that Egypt, due to the decline in Suez Canal revenues as a result of the fall in world trade, particularly oil and natural gas, remittances and tourism, could lose \$2.3-\$2.6 billion a month, hitting the poor hardest. Prior to the pandemic, one in three Egyptians were living on less than \$1.40 a day and, according to the World Bank, "some 60 percent of Egypt's population is either poor or vulnerable."

Under conditions where the state is the single main employer, accounting for six million jobs and providing patronage for politicians' supporters, most people work

in the informal sector as daily wage earners and street peddlers, testifying to the total inability of the national bourgeoisie to develop the economy after nominal independence from the colonial powers. These workers have a stark choice: work and risk infection or stop and risk starvation.

While the government announced a \$5.6 billion raft of measures—chiefly cheap loans—to support the employers, it provided little or nothing in the way of income support to the working class.

The official number of cases of COVID-19 is approaching 25,000 and the number of deaths nearly 1,000. But these figures are widely believed to be a gross underestimate, because of the lack of testing, the lag in reporting deaths attributable to the virus outside hospitals and the government's desire to cover up the scale of the crisis and its role in the spread of the pandemic. Egypt expelled *Guardian* and *New York Times*' reporters for questioning the data.

Egypt's healthcare system has proved incapable of responding effectively to the crisis. The Egyptian Medical Syndicate has said that 19 doctors had died from the disease and more than 350 others were ill. It accused the Ministry of Health of negligence for its handling of COVID-19 and said it was responsible for the doctors' deaths for failing to provide personal protective equipment and quarantine beds for frontline staff. It warned the system could "collapse." This warning came two days after a 32-year-old doctor, unable to get a bed at a quarantine hospital, died. His death prompted doctors at Cairo's al-Munira hospital to publish a mass resignation letter on Facebook.

Despite the rising death toll, two weeks ago the government moved to reopen the economy, restarting public transport, opening shops and businesses and allowing hotels and the hospitality sector catering to the domestic market to start operating, prompting fears of a

renewed surge in cases. The flight and travel ban had closed the country's tourism sector, which accounts for around 12 to 15 percent of GDP and brings in \$1 billion of foreign currency a month and is a major employer.

In April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned in its World Economic Outlook that the Middle East and North African economies could shrink by 3.3 percent in 2020. The pandemic would compound the region's unemployment problem and worsen the already high public and external debt. Acutely aware of the social tensions, it added, "A mishandling of the outbreak could elevate distrust in local governments, sowing seeds for further social unrest and adding to regional uncertainty."

The IMF has already approved \$2.8 billion in new emergency financing for Egypt even as it is considering another loan of up to \$5 billion more. It follows a \$12 billion IMF package negotiated in 2016 that entailed harsh austerity measures, including cutting subsidies on fuel and electricity that particularly impacted the poor. Last month, the cabinet approved a draft law cutting public sector salaries and pension payments.

Heightened social tensions lie behind el-Sisi's assumption of ever greater dictatorial powers, despite the fact that Egypt has been under a state of emergency for most of the past four decades except for brief intervals between 2012 and 2017.

During his seven years in power, el-Sisi has thrown 60,000 political activists, critics, including secular and Muslim Brotherhood politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders, into Egypt's notoriously overcrowded and squalid prisons, where they are often detained for years without trial. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), hundreds have died in custody due to medical negligence or the atrocious conditions.

Egypt ranks as one of the foremost jailers of journalists and bloggers who dare to voice criticism of the regime. Sisi has arrested the relatives of at least 15 dissidents, journalists and cultural figures, who have used social media platforms to air their criticisms in exile. The security services have blocked more than 500 websites, bought up shares in TV networks and censored the scripts of popular TV series.

Two Washington-based think tanks, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Center for International Policy (CIP), said, "Sisi's regime has engaged in a systematic pattern of gross human rights violations, from gunning down peaceful protesters in the streets to jailing tens of thousands of political opponents, including journalists, academics, and human rights

defenders."

It added, "The Sisi government has severely restricted the ability of independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate, all but eliminated a free and independent press, and perpetuated tensions between Muslims and Christians."

All this has proceeded with the tacit support of successive US administrations and the major European powers. Now the new law gives the intelligence and military forces wide ranging law-enforcement powers, including arrests, investigations into crimes, the detention of "suspects" and the seizure of property without judicial oversight.

It gives el-Sisi as president the power to order the military to conduct preliminary investigations and prosecutions into offences deemed a violation of the emergency law.

Other powers include closing schools and universities, shutting down public and private-sector bodies entirely or partially, postponing payment of bills and compelling Egyptian returnees from abroad to undergo quarantine on their arrival home. Crucially, they include restricting different forms of public and private gatherings, banning the export of certain goods and turning schools and youth centres into hospitals.

Human Rights watch wrote that the amendments amounted to a "cover for new repressive powers" that "could curb rights in the name of 'public order.'" It pointed out, "Only five of the 18 proposed amendments are clearly tied to public health developments. Making them part of the emergency law means that the authorities can enforce the measures whenever a state of emergency is declared, regardless of whether there is a public health emergency."

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