

The Missing Revolution: El-Sisi's Presidency in the Light of the Army's Historical Role in Egypt

Robert Priewasser

Abstract

This essay outlines the discourse about the military's role in the Egyptian state and explains why it has been able to secure its position as the most important political and economic player in the country until today. Referring to the traditionally dominant role of the army in Egypt it will be shown that since Gamal Abdel Nasser the military regime is deeply rooted within Egyptian society, economy, and national ideology. Accordingly, after the successful overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, the candidacy of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for presidency – and his election in May 2014 – was an inevitable consequence. A third revolution to eliminate the dominant role of the army is as yet missing and seems more unlikely than ever.

Introduction

Both in his speech of 28 March 2014 announcing his presidential candidacy and in his first big TV-interview of 5 May, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in addressing the people of Egypt makes reference to the country's recent past and the currently difficult situation. Various aspects of both public appearances shed a great deal of light on the role and position of the military in Egypt and its relationship to the divergent social, ethnic, and religious groups within the country. An analysis of both the historical and present role of the military, and in particular of Sisi, on the basis of these two appearances is revealing. In his speech of 28 March, Sisi subscribes openly to the national narrative, propagated by the regime since Nasser's

times, stating: "I have spent my entire career as a soldier of this homeland, serving its hopes and aspirations and in this way I shall continue" (El-Sisi 2014a). The underlying message is that the army is the only guarantor of stability and prosperity; a message he repeats almost identically only two paragraphs later. In the televised interview of 5 May, when asked about the comparisons frequently drawn between himself and Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sisi announces, humbly, that "His power and abilities were beyond his time. God willing I'll be like that" (El-Sisi 2014b).

Since the Egyptian army is a "people's army", and literally every family in the country has or has had at least one son serving in it, the ties between the population and its armed forces is strong and, in its own way, it represents the nation as a whole. Further on in his speech, Sisi styles the army champion of an independent Egypt, underscoring that "Egypt is not a playground for any internal, regional or international parties and will never be. We do not interfere in the affairs of others and we will not allow others to interfere in our affairs" (El-Sisi 2014a). Such remarks not only speak to the fear of many Egyptians that their country, weakened after two revolutions, might once again become the pawn of foreign (mainly American) interests; they also imply the acceptance of a national narrative historically rooted in Egyptian society. According to this narrative, it was the army that freed Egypt from a corrupt foreign dynasty in 1952, saved the nation from the threat of an Israeli, British and French invasion (in the Suez Crisis), and restored – after the disgraceful 1967 defeat against Israel – collective national honor in October 1973 by crossing the Suez Canal (Cook 2007: 28). In addition to these historical claims, the army was able to use both the 2011 and the 2013 revolutions by exploiting the mass media to convince a majority of the population that the armed forces had enabled the people to oust Mubarak and later Morsi. This discourse deliberately conceals the fact that the military regime actually abandoned President Mubarak in its own interest. Mubarak's mistake had been to position his son Gamal, who had no military experience, as his successor. This was the decisive argument for the military elite to change allegiances and abandon Mubarak during the revolution of February 2011, as it would have been "the first time in the

modern era [that] the military establishment would be separated from the presidency” (Cook 2007: 138f.).

Similarly, when the military deposed Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013, it did so not only in response to the demands of the millions of Egyptians protesting on the streets; the primary intention was in fact to restore the military’s control of the government. After all, Morsi (and the Muslim Brothers in the background) had dared to limit the army’s influence in everyday politics. This ultimately has its root cause in the central phenomenon of “ruling but not governing”, described so aptly by Steven A. Cook (2007). In order to understand this phenomenon we must go back to the 19th century in Egyptian history.

Authoritarian tradition and the military in Egypt since the 19th century

The beginnings of modern Egyptian army might reach back to the first decades of the 19th century. The army reform implemented by Mohamed Ali in the early 19th century inevitably led to a program of education; in the schools opening all over Egypt, not only military knowledge but also other, secular, sciences were taught. In April 1826, 40 students were sent to France to be trained in military and civil administration, artillery, chemistry and medicine but also in law, economy, translation and in arts like etching and lithography. Subsequent educational missions to Paris followed in 1829, 1830 and 1832. One of the most remarkable Egyptian students in Paris was Rifaa Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801-1873). He was the son of a prominent family from Sohag in Upper Egypt and had studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo before (Gaultier-Kurhan 2005: 125-128). In Paris he focused on the translation of French literature, but also and in particular on political and philosophical texts. Rifaa also translated secular legal studies and jurisprudence like the French Civil Code, which had a huge influence on Egyptian law (Vatikiotis 1969/86: 113-114). Thus the military reform had become, among other things, “the impetus for a wide programme of education of a new, secular nature” (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985/2007: 68).

At the same time, the modernization of Mohamed Ali's army "did unwittingly contribute to the rise of Egyptian nationalism" (Fahmy 2003: 268) by uniting tens of thousands of Egyptians, mostly fellahin, through the common experience of military service. This experience in particular is to this day very present in the consciousness of the Egyptian people. On occasions, the army could even become an instrument in the hands of nationalist politicians trying to liberate Egypt from the foreign domination by the British. Politically influential large landowners, for instance, used the armed forces' power under Ahmed Urabi to press for a constitution in early 1882¹ (Schölch 1972: 141-147).

The role of the military in Egypt was, as in many other countries, by and large detrimental to the political development of the state. While at the beginning of the 19th century "the consequences of the Pasha's pursuit of power and dominion constituted the essential foundations of the development of modern Egypt – both as a state and a society" (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 69), the military officers who became presidents after the 1952 coup d'état – Nasser, Sadat, and especially Mubarak – increasingly eroded the political and economic stability of the country. However, this erosion was not only the fault of the military regime after 1952 but started already in the 19th century and, at that time, was determined particularly by the self-concept of the monarchs and the political class as a whole.

For a long time, the mere notion of an opposition was utterly unthinkable in Egypt. When the first Consultative Assembly met on 10 November 1866 and the Secretary of the Assembly told delegates to sit in three groups, according to the pattern of European parliaments – "pro government on the Right, opposition on the Left, and moderates in the Middle – all the Delegates crowded on the Right murmuring, 'How can we be opposed to the Government?'" (Vatikiotis 1969/86: 128). It was not until the second half of the 19th century, particularly the 1870s, that "encouragement of the Press,

¹ The Urabi revolt itself, however, was more of a religious and patriotic reaction against foreign (predominantly British) influence and control over Egypt's government than a real national movement - e.g. it did not question the supreme authority of the Ottoman Sultan (Priewasser 2012: 35).

constitutional experiments, and the importation of European models in general [...] taught Egyptians for the first time the idea of opposition to a ruler" (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 166).

Another problem was the lack of political culture: Since the very beginning of parliamentary life in Egypt, even democratic politicians had cultivated a political style marked by personal authoritarianism rather than co-operation for the sake of the common good of the country. Although the 1920s are known as Egypt's "liberal era", the legacy of that time's most influential politician, Saad Zaghlul, was marked by an unmistakably authoritarian style, which sought to exert "absolutist control over party politics" (Botman 1991: 37). Zaghlul is considered to have "sown many of the public ills that have beset political life to the present day" (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985/2007: 102). In combination with the monarch's continuous attempts to regain absolute power, this was poison for the development of a strong democratic consciousness in the Egyptian people. For instance in June 1928, King Fu'ad postponed parliamentary sessions for one month, "and on 19 July dissolved Parliament and postponed elections for three years" (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 284), during which, of course, Egypt was to be governed by royal decree. In 1930, one of Egypt's most ambitious politicians, Prime Minister Ismail Sidqi, formed the conservative People's Party (*Hizb al-Shaab*). It was more of a clique around its founder than an actual political party and was "set up to support Sidqi's own political aspirations and to undermine the interests of the Unity and *Wafd* parties" (Botman 1991: 68). On 22 October 1930, Sidqi abolished the 1923 constitution. Not only did he draft a new one, he also promulgated a new electoral law strengthening the king's powers on the one hand, and minimizing the chances of a landslide *Wafdist* victory in the upcoming elections on the other (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 287). It did not come to elections, however, as parliament had been suspended in July 1930 and remained so until May 1936, making the Sidqi regime and the three succeeding governments the longest period of rule by decree since 1922.

One of the main reasons for the failure of the "liberal experiment" in Egypt was that King Fu'ad and his successor Farouk (1936-52) systematically obstructed parliamentarianism, dismissing ministers and dissolving the

House time and again. From 1924 to 1952 parliament was in session for a mere total of 17 years. For the remaining eleven, the monarchs ruled by decree (El-Ghannam 1968: 51). Thus we see that even in the so-called “liberal era” of the 1920s and 30s, personal interests dominated political life. El-Ghannam styles this regime a “parliamentary oligarchy” (El-Ghannam 1968: 52), a system that has survived in Egypt to this day. Egyptian anthropologist Mohamed Yosri E. Debees even states that “in Islamic countries people do not distinguish between personal and professional relationships” (Yosri 2011). As “a result of *Wafdist* restraints on the political process, the masses’ connection to mainstream political life in Egypt remained weak” (Botman 1991: 33) for the whole period. Indeed, this has remained a characteristic of Egyptian political parties to the present day.

Another formative element in Egyptian politics with a tradition going back to the late 19th century are the nationalist movements. The military regimes up to Mubarak were not the first to exploit national sentiment in order to legitimize their power. Nationalism was already essential for the parties in the liberal era of the 1920s and 1930s. As the most influential political party before 1952, the *Wafd* had already established a paramilitary youth organization, the Blue Shirts, which were “founded to mobilize party followers and the masses, as well as to intimidate and terrorize the opposition” (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 292). On the far right, the Blue Shirts were countered by the anti-Western, religious, patriotic, militaristic, and socially conservative movement Young Egypt (*Misr al-Fatat*), whose sign was the green shirt (Botman 1991: 117). The ideology of Young Egypt can be characterized by their slogan “Country, Islam, and King” (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 292). Founded in 1933 and transformed into an official political party in 1938, it reflected the discontent with liberal, secular, “European” democracy in Egypt.

In 1928, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization, which sought to liberate Egypt from British influence by returning to traditional religious values. Even the officers around Nasser and Naguib were challenged on the national issue by the Brotherhood, for “[...] the Free Officers and the Muslim Brotherhood [...] were in many ways

nationalist competitors” (Cook 2007: 29). That was to lead, as will be seen, to the Brotherhood’s prohibition and prosecution – a recurrent pattern in Egyptian politics.

The other competitor of the Free Officers was the political left. When the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE), after the 1952 coup, denounced the Nasser regime as a pro-American fascist dictatorship, it had to remain underground until Nasser concluded an arms purchase agreement with Czechoslovakia in 1955. This deal, along with Nasser’s “patriotism”, his neutral positioning at the Bandung conference the same year, the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, his nationalization policies in general, and his turning away from the West finally encouraged many leftists to support the regime (Cahiers d’histoire 2008).

Initially, the country’s leading political figures applauded the military for its intervention, the same military which was to eventually sweep them all away: “In traditional political style all the party leaders hastened to congratulate the army for ridding the country of the ‘tyrant’ Faruq and to swear undying loyalty to the ‘revolution’” (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 376). But already on 12 and 13 August 1952, a strike at the Misr Company textile factories in Kafr al-Dawar, south of Alexandria, where the workers had declared their support for Naguib and the officer’s regime, and demanded representation by a union and the removal of five managers, was brutally crushed by the army, resulting in the arrests of 545 workers (Beinin/Lockman 1987: 423). After a hastily convened military tribunal, two workers – allegedly communists – were sentenced to death, clearly indicating “the absolute hostility of most of the Free Officers towards independent action by the working class, even when taken in support of the army” (Beinin/Lockman 1987: 431).

It is even more surprising to note that liberal intellectuals, socialists and communists alike, actively contributed to the formulation and support of modern authoritarian discourse in the mid-1950s (Cahiers d’histoire 2008). General secretary of the CPE and leader of the Al-Raya movement, Fu’ad Morsi, is quoted as saying that freedom is for the majority and not the minority, and that it does not necessarily entail the diversity of opinion

(*inqisam al-ra'y*), a multi-party system (*ta'addud al-ahzâb*), or the existence of an opposition (*qiyam al-mu'arada*). According to him, democracy means the protection of the majority by the government (Cahiers d'histoire 2008). As a staunch advocate of the Marxist logic of the "historic task", Fu'ad Morsi states:

"La démocratie n'est pas un objectif en elle-même, cependant elle est un moyen pour engager le combat du progrès social... car la démocratie se réalise par la capacité de participation de l'ensemble du peuple à la réalisation des tâches historiques [...] La liberté politique pour le peuple... [est] sa liberté dans l'expression de ses buts historiques et son auto-organisation pour les réaliser [et la majorité doit] disposer de ses libertés naturelles dans la constitution, l'appui et la protection de son gouvernement... Donc, cela ne donne pas de sens à l'opposition... ceci est un des critères de la démocratie" (Cahiers d'histoire 2008).

Such attitudes are prevalent in Egypt to this day – exemplified by one of the banners at Tahrir Square in summer 2011 stating: "Democracy is the will of the majority".

Summarizing the events of summer 1952, Vatikiotis stated that the Free Officer's coup was "nothing more than the replacement of a monarchy [...] with a new state bureaucratic *élite* of soldiers, technocrats, and petty officials" (Vatikiotis 1968: 364). At the same time, most Egyptians associated the coup with hopes for a better future as, for the first time in more than two thousand years, Egypt was ruled by Egyptians. They believed not only that the officers were nationalists who would end British interference in Egyptian politics, but also that they would reform the country (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985/2007: 127). But, just like Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the officers around him in 2013, the Free Officers of 1952 were not sure in which direction to take the country, what kind of government it should have, and how to connect the mass of the population with their ideas in order to broaden the basis of the new regime. Four months before the revolution, in a newsletter from March 1952, the officers demanded the abolition of capital

punishment and censorship, the release of political prisoners and the reestablishment of the constitution (El-Ghannam 1968: 88). And shortly after their coup, the Free Officer's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) of 1952 formulated a six-point program promoting the establishment of democracy and the promotion of social justice (Beinin/Lockman 1987: 418). Like el-Sisi, who after Morsi's deposition abolished the Islamist constitution of November 2012², after the coup d'état of 1952, "the junta declared on 10 December the abolition of the 1923 Constitution" (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 379). Although a whole group around Mohamed Naguib genuinely preferred a return to constitutionalism, it was Naguib himself who declared on 17 January 1953 a three-year transition period, in which the RCC would rule before reestablishing the parliamentary system. On the same day, "all political parties were dissolved and banned, and their funds confiscated" (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 379). Finally, the establishment of the Liberation Rally in the same year, "which was a mass-based organization intended to bond the Egyptian people to the new order, was the officer's first effort to institutionalize their regime" (Cook 2007: 64). Authoritarian political traditions and nationalist movements were already laying the groundwork for the post-1952 military regimes. In this context, it is particularly interesting to look at the relationship between the regime and religion since 1952.

The military regime and religion

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is fond of quoting from the Quran. As is typical for politicians in Islamic countries he makes frequent reference to God both at the beginning and end of his public speeches, including the public announcement of his presidential candidacy on 28 March. Sisi makes no secret of his "absolute faith in God" and even asserts that the new

² This constitution was accepted in a referendum in December 2012 by over 63% of voters.

constitution of December 2013 was “successfully drafted [...] with God’s help” (El-Sisi 2014a).

In Egypt it is not unusual for the political elite to stress its piety. Time and again, army officers have come under the sway of Islamic preachers. One such example is the leader of the 1881-82 revolt, Ahmad Urabi, who was particularly affected by the popular Islamic reformer and political agitator Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Afghani called for “reforms ranging from demands for equality before the law, to ministerial responsibility and certain aspects of civil liberty” (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 135). Even Nasser and his officers with their socialist economical concepts strongly felt the need to maintain good relations with the religious elite. Anwar al-Sadat, for instance, had sympathies for the Muslim Brotherhood, and Nasser was in touch with both the Brotherhood and the communist Democratic Movement for National Liberation (Beinin/Lockman 1987: 419). What’s more: “In a telling symbolic gesture, the first place that Nasser and his fellow Free Officers visited after forcing King Farouk to flee to Italy was al-Azhar [...]” (Cook 2007: 12).

While Nasser had ousted and persecuted the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) as soon as he had consolidated his power, his successor Sadat sought to use the Brotherhood firstly to strengthen his position against the Nasserists, and secondly to support the pseudo-democratic multiparty façade he had established in the mid-1970s. More will be said on this topic later.

Whereas Article 3 of the 1956 constitution had established Islam as the state religion, Article 2 of the 1971 constitution added that, “the principles of the Islamic *shari’a* are a principal source of legislation”, which was finally amended to “Islamic jurisprudence [*shari’a*] is *the* principal source of legislation” in May 1980 (Cook 2007: 65).

The regime’s strategy to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood was based until Mubarak on two key aspects. First, there was “the military-political elite’s calculation that even as the Brotherhood was authorized to pursue social and political activities, the organization would nevertheless remain subject to state control. [And second] they believed the organization’s continued presence in the political arena served their own overall objective, which was to drain away support for violent Islamist extremist groups”

(Cook 2007: 78). During the Sadat and Mubarak era, Islamist movements were “likely to be accepted within the bounds of the political arena as long as they [did] not arrive in numbers significant enough to alter the prevailing institutional setting or as long as they suppress[ed] aspects of their political agenda in order to maintain their legal status” (Cook 2007: 3).

Until today the attitude of the military officers against the *Ikhwan* did not differ greatly from its attitude towards anti-state political activists in general. This attitude stemmed from two factors. “First, the military elite and its civilian allies derive[d] significant benefit from Islamist participation. Both legitimacy of the regime and the ability of authoritarian leaders to neutralize opposition [were] greatly enhanced. Second, the officers, like all individuals, do not possess a perfect theory of politics and tend to believe that they can manage the risks associated with Islamist political participation. When this proves to be a miscalculation, the senior command moves decisively to exclude Islamists from politics” (Cook 2007: 3-4).

When millions of Egyptians demanded the demission of Morsi in June 2013, the military’s response was harsh and quick to come. The officers saw their chance to regain the fullness of political power. The suppression of the Muslim Brothers and their followers began immediately after Mohamed Morsi’s deposition (3 July 2013). It reached its climax in the trials against alleged Morsi-followers in al-Minya at the end of March 2014, in which 529 people were found guilty of killing a high-ranking police officer. At another trial, 638 more Morsi-supporters were sentenced to death on 28 April for participating in violent protests and murder. Like other trials since the summer of 2013, both were heavily criticized both in Egypt and abroad. Most recently, on 9 August 2014, the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party was dissolved and its property confiscated (Noueihed, 2014).

The *Ikhwan* had dared to challenge the military on two fronts: politics and economy. That was not acceptable to the military elite. When asked in a May 5th interview whether as president he would require of the Egyptian people piety or obedience to the law, El-Sisi stated: “The leader deals with reality in a holistic manner and he puts strict rules for the matters not to

escalate as we are experiencing it now – namely: people destroying and killing while preaching in the name of religion [...]” (El-Sisi 2014b). In the same interview Sisi also made clear that he does not share the *Ikhwan’s* religious-political vision, adding: “I am convinced that the religious discourse in the Islamic world has lost its humanity. And that’s a grave problem for we have presented an image of God which is unworthy of his greatness, and that requires of us and of all responsible politicians to rethink their position [...]” (El-Sisi 2014b). It is in this vein that Gudrun Harrer remarks that El-Sisi is just as religious as he is negative in his attitude towards an Islamic state and, thus, resembles Sadat much more than Nasser (Harrer 2014: 125).

The Pharaonic Political system and its pseudo-democratic façade

The following section sheds some light on the establishment of Egypt’s military regime since president Nasser. After Nasser ousted Mohamed Naguib in the fall of 1954, army officers acquired permanent bureaucratic functions and subsequently diplomatic posts, provincial governorships, and key positions for the planning of economic and social policies, establishing what Vatikiotis calls a *stratitocracy*, i.e. a rule of soldiers (Vatikiotis 1968: 369-370). The constitution drafted by the Constituent Assembly under Naguib in November 1952 had stipulated a return to parliamentarianism but was abolished by Nasser and replaced with a new one promulgated on 17 January 1956 (El-Ghannam 1968: 111). “The real innovation introduced by this constitutional charter [...] was that it replaced a parliamentary form of government by a presidential system” (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 384).

The preamble of the first constitution of the post-monarchy era, promulgated in June 1956, began with the phrase “We, the people of Egypt”, and stressed concepts like “freedom, liberty, equality, justice, and dignity” (Cook 2007: 65) – the same terms which were once again omnipresent half a century later. The charismatic Nasser managed to skillfully maintain the illusion of popular participation and *shura* (arab.

“consultation”, “deliberation”, “taking counsel”, “counsel”, “advice”, “participation”). He did so by officially basing his personal rule on the “legitimizing principle of the people’s consent. [...] This bottom-up approach aimed to translate the desires and wants of the people into state policies and national socio-economic strategies” (Osman 2010: 47). Yet as Al-Sayyid Marsot critically remarks, “the new regime, though it did not allow the population a share in government, allowed them the semblance of participation. Claiming to act in the name of the people while directing policies hatched by a small group of bureaucrats, it nonetheless allowed the people to believe they were participating in decision-making” (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985/2007: 153).

The *coup de grace* came when Sadat sought to eliminate a number of powerful and politicized senior military officers in the “Corrective Revolution” of May 1971. This resulted in the “institutionalization of the presidency as the undisputed principal actor in Egyptian politics” (Cook 2007: 63) and thus as the indispensable instrument of the army at the head of the government.

The parliamentary system under Mubarak might be best described as a sham democracy. All the approved parties were either founded and financed by the regime or were so insignificant that they served merely as an alibi for democracy. The only party vested with real political power was the National Democratic Party (NDP)³, which was closely tied to and totally controlled by the regime.

Following in the footsteps of Nasser and Sadat, Mubarak also ensured that the political development of the country was directed solely from above, with the ruling clique around the president as the army’s personal proxy. “It was no surprise that Sadat chose someone from the military. For his own survival, Sadat had to reassure the senior officers that he would not ignore their interests [...]” (Waterbury 1983: XV).

³The National Democratic Party arose in 1978 from the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), which had been founded by Nasser in 1962, and was dissolved on 16 April 2011.

Before becoming provisional president after Nasser's death, Sadat was vice president both from 1964-66 and 1969-70. Likewise, he later made Mubarak his vice president. "In practice, Egypt's heads of state have been selected through the officer corps. When Anwar Sadat chose Air Force general Mohamed Hosni Mubarak to be his vice president in 1976, [...] there was never any question that Mubarak would succeed Sadat after the president's assassination in October 1981" (Cook 2007: 74). It is symptomatic that when he resigned in February 2011, Mubarak handed over his power to the military, embodied by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) under the minister of defense, field marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi (Fischer Weltalmanach 2012: 49).

Al-Sayyid Marsot reminds us that in all presidential elections (with the exception of 2005), Mubarak was the sole candidate. He also points out that though political parties of all persuasions (except religious ones) had been admitted since 1984, "the president still chooses the prime minister, and the entire cabinet is responsible to the president, not to parliament" (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985/2007: 171).

Similarly, the sensitive matters such as the military budget are never subject to audit. "[A]lthough the executive's authority in areas related to armament allocation and procurement – particularly from foreign suppliers – is subject to parliamentary review, this has never occurred. Indeed [...] no actual oversight ever takes place" (Cook 2007: 74). Cook quotes one retired military officer who explained in January 2000, "The minister of defense may brief the parliament, but there is no real dialogue, the members are not culturally inclined to question the military" (Cook 2007: 74). This is the sort of behavior which led political scientist Hamdy Abdel Rahman Hassan to dub the Mubarak regime the "Pharaonic Political System" (Hassan 2010: 319); he also calls Egypt a "presidential state" in which all "authoritative and influential bodies of the state machinery are subordinated to the presidency, formally or informally" (Hassan 2010: 327). Goodson and Radwan make similar observations: "despite a constitution that embraces democratic principles, Egypt's political institutions are dominated by the

enormous powers of the executive which overwhelm the legislature and marginalize the judiciary. Egypt has a highly centralized and paternalistic political culture which endorses the dominant presidency” (Goodson and Radwan 1997).

Such a political system is highly interested in controlling the mass media. According to the World Press Freedom Index 2014 provided by Reporters Without Borders, Egypt holds place 159 out of 180 countries (World Press Freedom Index 2014). In May 1960, the “capitalist press” was expropriated and the government began to appoint all chief-editors and dictate newspaper content. Egyptian radio had been a state monopoly since the times of the monarchy, and it was later used by the Nasser regime – just like the 1960 founded Egyptian television – as a means of government propaganda (El-Ghannam 1968: 134-135).

On the local administrative level, already Sadat marginalized participative structures by restricting the power of rural elites and otherwise strengthening the NDP. Law 43 of 1979 made local governors (all members of the NDP) de facto dictators in their provinces and diminished the powers of local councils, dealing yet another blow to more representative systems of local government. Besides tighter control over the provinces, Sadat sought to secure a complete victory of the NDP in national elections when “he reduced the number of members of the rural elites on the candidacy list, thus curtailing their representation in the People’s Assembly and increasing that of government officials and syndicate leaders” (Fahmy 2002: 192-194).

Considered an essential part of any parliamentary system in Western democracies, the political parties in Egypt, though revived under Sadat, were made to languish. The admission of political platforms in the mid-1970s was calculated to provide the ruling party with a “loyal opposition” encompassing both sides of the political spectrum within the Arab Socialist Union. In reality, the admission of political parties as per Law 40/1977 was a mere masquerade as the committee in charge of the affairs of political parties was dominated by Egypt’s ruling ASU party (renamed the National Democratic Party in 1978). The Political Parties Committee therefor became a means of political control (Cook 2007: 69). Law No. 40, article 4, item 3 of

1977 banned all political parties founded on the base of social class, religion, gender, or any other geographical or ethnical criteria. This article aimed particularly to deny the Muslim Brotherhood recognition as a political party (Fahmy 2002: 67). The various restrictions in the Political Parties Law were tightened in 2004. For instance: in order to gain legal recognition, would-be parties were required to obtain a minimum of 1,000 signatures from citizens based in at least ten of Egypt's governorates. They were further required to "detail their sources of funding, none of which may come from foreign countries" (Cook 2007: 70). These and similar persistent restrictions (which since 2005 also apply to presidential candidates) reveal the manifest intention of the NDP "to ensure the authoritarian status quo under the guise of reform" (Cook 2007: 71). The famous Egyptian writer Alaa Al Aswany, one of the founding members of the Egyptian grassroots movement for political change *Kefaya* in the early 2000s, excoriates the role played by these political parties: "Most of these parties are paper puppets on strings held by the regime. Some of the party leaders cooperate with the security agencies and some of them are such favorites of the regime (which they claim to oppose) that they are appointed members of the upper house of parliament" (Al Aswani 2011: 63).

In the Egyptian society (with its patriarchal nepotism in politics and economy) the president is, together with his entourage, the main source of political and economic power. Consequently, "[i]f the officer corps needs to, it can influence political events through the president. This mutually reinforcing relationship with the president has allowed the officers to remove themselves from day-to-day governance" (Cook 2007: 73). Thus the powerful circle of high military officers in Egypt is in a position to rule without governing, as Cook succinctly puts it: "[...] the officers sought to conceal themselves behind the veneer of democratic institutions [...] During periods of crisis, however, the military elite tend to strip away this façade, revealing themselves as the locus of power and reinforcing the authoritarian core of the political order" (Cook 2007: 15). This power is thinly veiled in the country's enormous security apparatus. Osman places the number of

Egyptians employed by internal security agencies before the 2011 Revolution at nearly two million (Osman 2010: 194).

In June 2012, the military elite was understandably nervous when it became predictable that the office of presidency with its enormous power would be achieved by the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi. First, the SCAF under field marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi tried to postpone the election without avail, a step that evoked mass protests (Fischer Weltalmanach 2013: 26). On 17 June, the second day of the run-off ballot between Morsi and Ahmed Shafik (the latter considered by many as a holdover of the Mubarak regime), the SCAF curtailed the president's power and at the same time granted itself almost unlimited authority (Fischer Weltalmanach 2013: 28).

However, since Nasser's time, the political and social atmosphere resulting from this system is hazy, where "[t]he presence of pseudodemocratic institutions and representative structures permits authoritarian regimes like Egypt's to diffuse, co-opt, and/or deflect political opposition" (Cook 2007: 76). A prime example of such a strategy can be found in the accommodation between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. On the other hand, a military regime always needs enemies for its legitimation. In the case of Egypt, the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups like the *Salafi* have repeatedly proved the ideal target for crackdowns. In this way, the regime has been able to uphold its image as the country's sole purveyor of security and combatant against terrorism, to both Egyptian society and its foreign (western) allies. It is an open secret, that the regime has repeatedly fomented tensions between Muslims and Copts in order to step in as sheriff. The state of emergency, which only shortly had been lifted in May 1980, but re-established immediately after the assassination of Sadat on the grounds of fighting Islamist terror, would not be lifted before 25 January 2012, just in time for the first anniversary of the mass protests against Mubarak (Priewasser 2012: 85).

Cook offers an appropriate summary of the situation: "The officers have grown comfortable with arrangements in which one of their own remains the head of state and a range of pseudodemocratic institutions and

representative structures insulate them from politics. [...] any public dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of politics is generally directed at the prime minister, the cabinet, or the bureaucracy" (Cook 2007: 77). El-Sisi is in a different situation today, however. The apparent hesitation to announce his candidacy and what appeared to be a longing for the masses to outright demand it show that the political consciousness of people has changed since the 2011 revolution. They are now making the president directly responsible for the bad economic state of affairs – as they did with Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

The military's economic power

The strength of Egypt's military regime is based, of course, not only on the pseudo-democratic political system and the institutional iron fist by which it keeps the people under control. It is also fed by a huge economic power base representing some 30 to 40 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. "[T]he military [...] can quite rightly claim to be the only state organization with the capacity to undertake infrastructure development and other public works projects" (Cook 2007: 15). The Nasser era was a time of close partnership with the Soviet Union, and Nasser himself was dedicated to a state-run economy. The Assuan High Dam was one of the most prestigious projects in this era.⁴ "In time, however, state-directed economies stagnated, and the officers became conservative elements clinging tenaciously to regimes in which they were (and remain) the primary beneficiaries" (Cook 2007: 14). When it comes down to it, "[...] personal financial gain or advantage to the military establishment is more important than economic development" (Cook 2007: 19).

⁴ The Assuan High Dam, besides, has also negative effects on Egypt's agriculture – e.g. since the natural mud settles in the Nasser Lake, the fellahin have to buy expensive chemical fertilizer, erosion increases on the coast of the Nile delta, whereas - due to salinization – the fish stocks in that region are decreasing.

Nasser's economic policies shipwrecked in the late 1970s. His successor Sadat sought to reduce Egypt's immense military expenses and open the country to western investors in order to better the situation of the millions of poor and starving Egyptians. The massive reduction of the military budget in the Sadat era was firstly made possible by the policy of détente against Israel (i.e. Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and the Camp David accords a year later), then by US-subsidies amounting to two billion dollars annually. These moves were to subsequently disseminate power from the military establishment and the huge and corrupt state bureaucracy and help create a new middle class in order to lay "the seeds of a democratic, capitalist, Western-oriented Egypt" (Osman 2010: 118). In reality, however, Sadat's *infitah* ("open-door policy") "allowed the members of the military enclave and the economic elite to benefit mutually from the 'commissions game,' which enriched the officers and ensured that, in return, contracts from the military continued to flow" (Cook 2007: 19). High-ranking army officers expanded into new fields of business, and "This diverse portfolio, which includes the manufacture of weapons, electronics, and consumer goods; infrastructure development; various agribusinesses; as well as services in the aviation, tourism, and security sectors has rendered the military perhaps Egypt's single most important economic entity" (Cook 2007: 19).

Infitah failed for a number of reasons. The Arabs reacted with hostility to Egypt's settlement with Israel, as when Saudi Arabia and Kuwait cut investments and economic aid; a loss Egypt tried to replace with American and West European aid (Vatikiotis 1969/1986: 432). But there were also domestic reasons for the failure. First, the only profiteers of *infitah* were the regime and its cronies, who amassed enormous wealth by acquiring industrial facilities, land, and real-estate like tourist hotels in southern Sinai and at the Red Sea. Second, the rise of the private sector and the decline in the role and status of the public sector led to substantial income gaps between the two. Tightened by high inflation, the traditional middle class made up of state officials, suffered a drastic erosion of its purchasing power. Lastly, the government slowly but steadily reduced the social safety net,

making the situation of the poor majority of the population even more desperate (Osman 2010: 118-122). Further, it was observed that “[...] there is no indication that the military is willing to allow its own considerable economic interests to be privatized” (Cook 2007: 20). Protected by the president and political elite, and using national security as a permanent argument for justifying its privileges, “the military has shielded the defense budget and its procurement policies from public view” (Cook 2007: 23).

Nonetheless the enormous economic power and material prosperity it enjoyed made the regime and its beneficiaries increasingly vulnerable, both politically and morally. “The Brotherhood’s economic vision and its criticism of prevailing conditions and practices posed a potential risk to the economic interests of the officer corps, which by the mid-1980s extended to an impressive array of industries and initiatives” (Cook 2007: 80).

As early as 1987, the Muslim Brotherhood had forged a coalition with both the Liberal Party and the Socialist Labor Party. Together they formulated an economic program demanding economic independence and development, and calling for an end both to fiscal irresponsibility and corruption in the state and public sectors through the application of *shari’a* (Cook 2007: 79f.).

However, during Morsi’s presidency, political power games and corruption continued, only with other actors involved. On 12 August 2012, Morsi abrogated the constitutional amendments by which the generals had curtailed his power, dismissed Tantawi and Chief of Staff Sami Anan and appointed El-Sisi new minister of defense. But in return, he had to make concessions to the military: The dismissed commanders in chief of the navy, air force and aerial defense became chief of the Suez Canal Authority, chairman of the Arab Organization for Industrialization, and minister for military production. Such civil positions retained them in control of important military sources of revenue (Fischer Weltalmanach 2014: 25f.).

Yet over the course of Mohamed Morsi’s one-year presidency, it became increasingly clear that the Brotherhood had neither a feasible concept nor any other ideas to temper the dramatic economic crisis Egypt was facing, especially after the overthrow of Mubarak. The situation under Morsi’s presidency continued to degenerate for these and other reasons. On the one

hand, large parts of the state bureaucracy refused to cooperate with the Morsi regime; on the other hand, Morsi himself, also often, demonstrated his political inexperience and inaptitude. This void made it easy for the traditional army elite to jump on the bandwagon of revolution in the summer of 2013 and re-establish its political power.

Conclusion

In the power vacuum opened since the deposition of president Morsi, Egypt's military regime has been able to regain absolute political control of the country. This is not least the fault of liberal and leftist politicians, whose criticism of both military and Brotherhood was all too short-lived, as Hamed Abdel-Samad notes. Figures like Mohamed ElBaradei were not active enough in fighting for a democratic alternative (Abdel-Samad 2014). The Egyptian political scientist and human rights activist Amr Hamzawy has repeatedly demanded that the army and security apparatus come under civil control in order to foster democracy in Egypt. As long as the military dictates policy, Egypt's civil and elected institutions remain weak and unable to control the army and secret police. This perversion of the proper distribution of powers engenders the acceptance of lacking human rights and other basic freedoms (Amr Hamzawy 2013).

There are no indications that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi will outshine any of his political predecessors, particularly with regard to the abysmal state of public institutions, the disastrous economy, and the ominous divide in Egyptian society; a divide which the military has further deepened by killing hundreds of Muslim Brothers with their supporters and suppressing all opposition. Furthermore, as Gudrun Harrer notes, president El-Sisi made himself assailable by taking over responsibility for the daily life of Egyptians (Harrer 2014: 124) and could quickly become unpopular if he fails to improve their suboptimal living standard. Then there might be a chance for the missing revolution to come to the fore. Yet as of fall 2014, no signals indicative of a willingness to overhaul Egypt's dismal political and

economic system have been forthcoming; neither from Sisi nor the government.

In the meantime, there is a number of factors which help the Sisi regime present itself to the United States as a stable partner and gain further military and economic aid. The precariousness of Syrian civil war, the territorial gains being made by DAISH Islamists (Islamic State, IS) both in Syria and Iraq, the looming collapse of the Iraqi state itself, and the rekindling of military hostilities between Hamas and Israel as of summer 2014 all fall into this category. Economically, Sisi strives to emulate his predecessor Nasser with the ambitious project of the Suez Canal extension, which started in August 2014. This gigantic enterprise is intended not only to gain economic profit in the future but apparently also to unite the country through a big national project – and through the president himself. However, just as in the Mubarak era, under El-Sisi the military continues to oppress the Muslim Brotherhood and all other opposition groups in disguise of its ‘fight against terrorism’. In August 2013, the *Ikhwan’s* protest camps in Cairo were forcibly cleared, freedom of the press and the right to protest are massively restricted. At the same time, the army’s deputies in the constitutional convention asserted that the new constitution guarantees the military’s privileges for at least eight more years. Therefore, the minister of defense is to be a general, appointed by the military, and, under specific circumstances, civilians still can be brought to military tribunals (Fischer Weltalmanach 2015: 28f.). The military’s power in Egypt seems to be cemented at least for the following years.

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