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# **Egypt: Strategic Implications of Extended Political Repression**

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# Egypt: Strategic Implications of Extended Political Repression?

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# Table of Contents

Introduction	1
What are the strategic implications of this extended political repression?	1
Political implications: deterrence or backlash?	1
Economic implications: political command versus the market	2
Security implications: militarisation and internationalisation	3
Repression of the everyday: culture and mental health	4
Moving Forward: Possible Futures	5
Protracted transition	5
Hybrid regime	5
Popular corrective coup	6
Conclusion	7
Bibliography	8



## Introduction

Indicators of political rights and civil liberties point at disturbing levels of repression in post-coup Egypt. In the three years following the inauguration of the coup leader – Abdel Fattah El Sisi – as president, the per capita rate of prisoners increased by 71%, by far the highest percentage increase worldwide.<sup>(1)</sup> In 2017, Egypt had the third-highest recorded number of death sentences in the world, most of which were political.<sup>(2)</sup> Currently, Egypt is the fifth-worst country on the *personal freedom index*<sup>(3)</sup> and has the third-largest population of imprisoned journalists.<sup>(4)</sup> Post-coup Egypt has consistently maintained the status of “not free”, the lowest of all possible categories, in the Freedom House’s *global freedom scores*, scoring an unprecedented low of 21 points (out of 100) in 2020.<sup>(5)</sup>

Future prospects do not seem brighter. Recent legislation is likely to accelerate repression further, as it grants the president further unchecked powers (Amendments 2019/Constitution 2014), intensifies the grip of the state over civil society (Law 149/2019) and cyber activity (Law 175/2019), and expands the scope of military prosecutions (Amendments 2020/Emergency Law 162/1958). The total impunity enjoyed by those who engage in policing practices of forced disappearances, systematic torture, and extrajudicial execution encourages extralegal repression.<sup>(6)</sup> On top of all this, there are no signs of political will to resolve, rather than repress, the current state of crisis.<sup>(7)</sup>

## What are the strategic implications of this extended political repression?

This analysis looks at the manifested implications of the current wave of political repression on resistance and regime politics, the economy, security, and everyday lives. It then discusses, in light of these implications, three possible scenarios for the country’s political future: the protraction of current “transitional” politics, the articulation of a hybrid regime, or a popular corrective coup.

### Political implications: deterrence or backlash?

The main strategic intention of political repression is deterring resistance. The actual degree of deterrence, however, depends on perception: the perceived severity of the violence dissidents will

1 Roy Walmsley, “World Prison Population List (twelfth edition),” *World Prison Brief/ Institute for Criminal Research*, 30/9/2018, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9Fvs>

2 Amnesty International, “Death Sentences and Executions 2017,” *Global Report*, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9FsV>

3 Ian Vásquez & Tanja Por nik, “Personal Freedom Index” in: *The Human Freedom Index 2019* (Massachusetts: Cato Institute, 2019), accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9lqz>

4 Committee to Protect Journalists, “China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt are world’s worst jailers of journalists,” accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9FpX>

5 “Country Data: Egypt,” *Freedom House*, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9FoY>

6 “‘We Do Unreasonable Things Here’: Torture and National Security in Al-Sisi Egypt,” *Human Rights Watch* (2017), accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GIr>

7 Roberto Rucco, “Neoliberal authoritarianism in Egypt before and after the uprisings: a critical international political economy perspective,” in: Steven C. Roach (ed.), *Handbook of Critical International Relations* (Massachusetts: Edgwar Elgar, 2020), pp. 221 - 241.



be subjected to,<sup>(8)</sup> but also whether would-be dissidents believe that abstaining will guarantee their safety.<sup>(9)</sup> In post-coup Egypt, the “spectacle” of state violence achieves the first condition,<sup>(10)</sup> but its highly indiscriminate targeting might cause a backlash. Observers have already noted signs of this backlash in the (counter)-insurgency in Sinai, manifesting in locals’ persistent reluctance to cooperate with state forces despite the latter’s vengeful retaliation.<sup>(11)</sup> The indiscriminate nature of state violence neutralises its deterrent effect, as it reframes it from an avoidable ramification to an inevitable situation that ought to be confronted. Should opposition actors, more broadly, perceive their victimisation as inevitable, they are likely to become more confrontational. In the long term, therefore, the current pattern of repression might not be as effective in deterrence as it seems at the moment. This has already manifested itself in the two recent waves of September uprisings in 2019 and 2020.

An equally severe backlash could arise from within the state’s coercive apparatus. In the absence of powerful civilian politicians, the involvement of the military and its intelligence in political portfolios is increasing significantly, consolidating their grip on the instruments of the state.<sup>(12)</sup> Meanwhile, the continued shutting down of the public sphere restrains the prospects of public resistance should these institutions attempt to expand their turf, whether through an outright coup or by softer means of power enhancement. To thwart that, Sisi relies on a policy of continuous reshuffling of the military leadership, an act which is arguably unconstitutional (Article 234 / 2014 Constitution).<sup>(13)</sup> With the continued empowerment of the institution, however, its leaders might eventually insist on their constitutional rights and push for further maximization of power.

## Economic implications: political command versus the market

A related implication of repression is the expansion of the military share in the economy, which currently amounts to a whole quarter of the total government spending.<sup>(14)</sup> By directly assigning highly profitable megaprojects to the military (mainly in the construction sector, but also in strategic consumer goods and services), Sisi links the massive fringe benefits of military officers with the resilience of his regime, setting their institutional interests in structural conflict with political dissent that might destabilize or entirely erase their financial privileges.

8 Jennifer Earl, “Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 37 (2011), pp. 261 - 284.

9 Stathis Kalyvas, “The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War,” *The Journal of Ethics*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2004), pp. 97 - 138.

10 Maged Mandour, “On the Spectacle of Violence,” *Opendemocracy*, 2/5/2016, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9G4y>

11 Omar Ashour, “ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: Complex Networks of Insurgency under Authoritarian Rule,” *DGAP Kompakt*, no. 15 (2016), accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9G74>

12 Stephen Roll & Luca Mieke, “Egypt Engulfed by Militarism,” *IEMed: Mediterranean yearbook*, (2019), pp. 205-208, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GeJ>

13 Robert Springborg & F. C. “Pink” Williams, “The Egyptian Military: a Slumbering Giant Awakes,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28/2/2019, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9Gi9>

14 Yazid Sayigh, “Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt’s Military Economy,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 18/11/2019, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GiH>



This subordination of the economy to politics, in which the (president's) assignment and the (military's) management of major projects are no longer subject to market dynamics, is causing the market problems on several fronts. The most damaging is the crowding-out effect on private investment<sup>(15)</sup> and its extended implication on state revenues (given that military businesses are tax-exempt) and labour markets (given the military businesses reliance on forced/free conscripted labour).<sup>(16)</sup> This “crowding-out” concern has been raised by construction sector market leaders<sup>(17)</sup> and IMF policymakers,<sup>(18)</sup> indicating a rising tension between Sisi regime's main financial stakeholders on the one hand and its primary political stakeholders on the other. In the long term, keeping the military happy – a necessary condition if current levels of repression are to be maintained – might prove unbearably costly in terms of lost state revenues, employment opportunities, private investments, and international financial assistance.

## Security implications: militarisation and internationalisation

On another note, the current wave of repression is likely to exacerbate Islamist militancy. Recent research highlights a mounting discourse of violence-as-necessity within the Muslim Brotherhood, the leading target group of the post-coup repression.<sup>(19)</sup> Systematic studies showed a direct relationship between the scale of anti-state and sectarian violence in each district in Egypt and the scale of the district's electoral loyalty to the Brotherhood, indicating that this discourse is actually materialising into violent action.<sup>(20)</sup> Organisationally, the Brotherhood remains insistent on nonviolent resistance. However, new groups, mostly with international ties, like Sinai Province and the Islamic State, are using the growing sense of misery to expand their activities and territorial presence, creating an alarming security crisis, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>(21)</sup>

The ensuing security crisis risks the internationalisation of the conflict. Signs of this developing internationalisation are manifested in Egypt's accommodation of politically embarrassing Israeli air force interventions in Sinai.<sup>(22)</sup> Besides concerns on border security and global terrorist networks, the international community is also concerned about the surge of political/

15 Yazid Sayigh, “Egypt's Military Now Controls Much of Its Economy. Is this Wise?” Q&A, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 25/11/2019, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GzK>

16 Jamal Boukhari, “Egypt's conscripts serving the army's economic empire,” *TheNewArab*, 5/9/2017, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GAR>

17 Hussein Sabbour in “btwqyt m r: mn qsha ma 'a l mn wmat l q r t fy mi r [Cairo Time: A Discussion with the Leaders of Construction in Egypt,” *Television Talk Show*, BBC Arabic, 4/8/2019, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9Gjg>

18 International Monetary Fund, “Arab Republic of Egypt: First Review under the Extended Arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility and Requests for Waivers for Nonobservance and Applicability of Performance Criteria,” Middle East and Central Asia Department, International Monetary Fund, *Country Report*, no. 17/290, 26/9/2017, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2AbODPV>.

19 Khalil Al-Anani, “Rethinking the Repression-dissent Nexus: Assessing Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's Response to Repression since the Coup of 2013,” *Democratization*, vol. 26, no. 8 (2019), pp. 1329–1341.

20 Steven Brooke & Elizabeth Nugent, “Exclusion and Violence After the Egyptian Coup,” *Middle East Law and Governance*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2020), pp. 61 - 85.

21 Omar Ashour, “Egypt's Security Harvest,” *Project Syndicate*, 11/7/2016, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GGF>

22 David Kirkpatrick, “Secret alliance: Israel carries out airstrikes in Egypt, with Cairo's OK,” *The New York Times*, 3/2/2018, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GQF>



humanitarian refugees as well as market stability<sup>(23)</sup>. It is uncertain, however, whether international pressures would be in favour of pacification or intensified repression. Sisi aspires to project the latter as a necessary condition for achieving stability,<sup>(24)</sup> yet current indicators suggest otherwise.<sup>(25)</sup>

## Repression of the everyday: culture and mental health

On the cultural level, the trickle-down of the discourse of repression encroached on various aspects that are not immediately related to regime politics. These include, among other things, the criminalisation of the popular *mahragan* music genre,<sup>(26)</sup> (women) dancing on the video-sharing app TikTok,<sup>(27)</sup> waving the rainbow flag,<sup>(28)</sup> and joking about the pollution of the River Nile.<sup>(29)</sup> Several citizens are already sentenced for such convictions. As repression has become culturally normalised, everyday interactions have become significantly constrained, even those irrelevant to strategic regime politics.

*The repression also took its toll on the activists' mental health, particularly the youth – the category most subjected to the current wave of state violence. This manifests itself in the form of a surge in suicidal depression,<sup>(30)</sup> post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>(31)</sup> and social resignation<sup>(32)</sup> among youth activists, and a steady increase in suicide rates (11% increase in the period '2010–2016' -- 5.3% increase in the years '2015–2016' only).<sup>(33)</sup> The long-term implications of this mental health situation are uncertain. Research on its current political manifestations indicates a growing trend of apathy, alienation, and meaninglessness.<sup>(34)</sup> Nevertheless, the literature on the politics of trauma suggests that common traumatic experiences and memories might on the long-term become tools of collective mobilization.<sup>(35)</sup>*

23 Yasser El-Shimy & Anthony Dworking, "Egypt in the edge: How Europe can avoid another crisis in Egypt," *European Council on Foreign Affairs*, 14/6/2017, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GR7>

24 "Egypt's President Sisi defends Sweeping Security Laws", *BBC News*, 9/11/2015, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GQN>

25 Ashour, "Egypt's Security Harvest".

26 Ezzedine Fishere, "Egypt's music ban is part of a more disturbing cultural repression," *Washington Post*, 28/2/2020, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GSy>

27 Amnesty International, "Egypt: Survivors of sexual violence and online abuse among prosecuted women TikTok influencers," 13/8/2020, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GTm>

28 Declan Walsh, "Egyptian Concertgoers wave a flag and land in jail," *The New York Times*, 26/9/2017, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GT5>

29 "Egypt's Sherine Sentenced to Prison over Nile Joke," *BBC News*, 27/2/2018, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GSI>

30 Laura Dean, "Turmoil in Egypt Takes its toll on mental health," *The World*, 3/1/2015, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GUZ>

31 Vivienne Matthies-Boon, "Shattered Worlds: Political Trauma amongst Young Activists in Post-revolutionary Egypt," *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2017), pp. 620 - 644.

32 Al-Anani.

33 "Egypt Suicide Trends 2000–2020," *Macrotrends*, accessed on 10/9/2020, at: <http://bitly.ws/9GVn>

34 Vivienne Matthies-Boon & Naomi Head, "Trauma as Counter-revolutionary Colonisation: Narratives from (Post) Revolutionary Egypt," *Journal of International Political Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2018), pp. 258 - 279.

35 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



## Moving Forward: Possible Futures

On the long-term, the implications discussed above might lead to several possible regime arrangements. This section discusses three of the most likely.

### Protracted transition

Despite the precarity of the political situation, Sisi appears capable of controlling the situation in its flux through a mixture of repression and rent distribution (mainly on coercive institutions), with the promise of political stability procrastinated endlessly. This is likely to remain; mainly because it is in this liminal context of “transition” that Sisi is most powerful. Sisi came to power as an “outsider” to politics, a military professional whose lack of political agenda is the primary reason for his suitability to lead the transition out of the politically contentious situation of flux.<sup>(36)</sup> He recognises that it is this task of transition that makes his traits and qualifications desirable, and that its completion might thus decrease the powers invested in him by actors whom he projects himself to as an essential “stabilizer”: the military-security state, his international allies (mainly KSA and the UAE), and a conservative public fearing another traumatising wave of transitional instability and insecurity.

The major challenge would be finding ways to extend the state of transition and “emergency” endlessly. Nonetheless, this state, as evident in the almost uninterrupted extension of the “state of emergency” laws since 1981, has been the norm of Egyptian politics for so long that both state institutions and the public are arguably already accustomed to it<sup>(37)</sup>.

### Hybrid regime

Otherwise, the regime might seek to transition away from political crisis through incorporation of a civilian elite: businessmen, technocrats, and loyalist politicians, including moderate Islamists. This incorporation, likely to happen through relatively competitive parliamentary elections, would provide a variety of essential services to Sisi’s regime. These include balancing power with the military, increasing trust in investment, mitigating the radicalising social polarisation, moderating an embarrassing culture of militarisation, and projecting a better image of governance to global stakeholders.

This prospect, however, is challenged by the public distrust of the current regime and any electoral procedures taking place under its auspices, as well as the military’s protectiveness of its political turf. These factors do not entirely impede the prospects of hybridity, but skews it towards a model in which the military component has a significant leverage over the civilian; comparable, for instance,

<sup>36</sup> Walter Armbrust, “Trickster Defeats the Revolution: Egypt as the Vanguard of the New Authoritarianism,” *Middle East Critique*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2017), pp. 221-239.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 4.





to the post-1999 coup era in Pakistan, in which the military rules over most strategic decisions but elected civilians are involved in everyday governance.<sup>(38)</sup>

## Popular corrective coup

A popularly-backed corrective coup remains an immanent scenario, for it smoothly resolves the current political deadlock. As most aspects of the political conflict have a significant personalised element, the mere change of leadership would significantly soothe it; without significant changes to the regime. The slightest change of faces – in fact, of one face – would render more likely the reconciliation with opposition actors, the mitigation of the agony that feeds into radicalisation, the addressing of the political trauma by holding its most immediate perpetrator(s) accountable, and the relaxation of many nonstrategic constraints on civil liberties by revisiting the culture of repression.

The literature on coups has long held that coup leaders who fail to swiftly articulate social hegemony are vulnerable to be toppled by another coup – usually by their own partners.<sup>(39)</sup> Examples abound; including Tito Okello in Uganda, Muhammadu Buhari in Nigeria, Valentine Strasser in Sierra Leone, Salah Jadid in Syria, Abdul Karim Qassim in Iraq, and Mohammed Naguib in Egypt, among others. In the absence of a ruling party (like Mubarak's National Democratic Party), a social base (like Nasser's working class), or any form of civilian backup that balances power with the military, Sisi is as vulnerable as any of these leaders.

Sisi relies on two main strategies of coup-proofing: the financial appeasement of the military, and the continuous reshuffling of its leadership. The latter might backfire, as it signals to current leaders that their positions are precarious and amplifies their possible concern about the precarity of the regime as a whole, given the daunting security situation and the steady decline of Sisi's popularity.

Any future social uprising is therefore likely to encourage a revision of the current military position: it would further demonstrate the dearth in regime popularity and hence stability, providing a pretext for military leaders to intervene to secure their positions and smoothly resolve unnecessary political tensions. But more importantly, the public perception of that possibility is likely to encourage mobilization. It would provide a political opportunity for the opposition to align, once again, with the military leadership, or at least limit their violence.

The coup's main challenge would be economic. Signalling political instability on the one hand and further military interference on the other, the coup would detrimentally affect investor confidence in the Egyptian market. It might as well induce political tensions with the chief financial supporters of Sisi regime, KSA and UAE. The latter, however, is less likely if no major changes are made to the regime beyond its head.

<sup>38</sup> Katharine Adeney, "How to Understand Pakistan's Hybrid Regime: The Importance of a Multidimensional Continuum," *Democratization*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2017), pp. 119 - 137.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Coup Theories and Officers' Motives: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).



## Conclusion

The above scenarios are not mutually exclusive and are likely to take place simultaneously or sequentially. To conclude on the path with the highest likelihood, more research is required on the highly censored area of military officers' standpoints on civilian governance, the security situation, and the political crisis. It also requires further unpacking of the foreign policies of key international stakeholders, particularly Israel, KSA and UAE, towards the political and security situation in Egypt. Ironically, however, political repression – in Egypt, but also in these countries – restricts the prospects of adequate research and hence the prospects of a comprehensive understanding of its own implications. Far from comprehensive, this analysis pointed at the main areas affected by the current wave of repression, the tensions within those areas, and the possible strategic outcomes of these tensions.

One signal is too loud to be ignored, however: the scattered yet considerable protests that took place on Friday, 25 September 2020. Referred to as the “second Friday of Rage” – in reference to the first “Friday of Rage” that sparked the downfall of Mubarak on 28 January 2011 – these protests were decentralised in terms of both space and leadership.<sup>(40)</sup> Whether this decentralised momentum will eventually crystallise into a new Tahrir-like *communitas* remains an open question. The answer depends on several factors, including the ability of the protestors to prolong the momentum, the failure of the regime to replace the ensuing anger with strategic fear by making its repression less indiscriminate, and the positions of strategic actors like the military, the security, and the international community. Yet, in all cases, these protests challenge the assumption that repression, on its own, is sufficient to stabilise the current regime.



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