



A New Kind of Dictator: el-Sisi's Multi-Pronged Assault on Democracy in Egypt

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TIMELINE

FEB 2011: After 29 years, President Mubarak steps down following mass anti-government protests.

JUN 2012: The Muslim Brotherhood candidate narrowly wins Egypt's first democratic election. President Mohamed Morsi assumes presidency.

DEC 2012: Islamist-dominated assembly approves draft constitution.

JUL 2013: After months of civil unrest, Minister of Defense El-Sisi leads the military in ousting Morsi.

JAN 2014: Transitional government passes new constitution; women's groups gain more leverage in the legislative process.

NOV 2015: Via presidential decree, el-Sisi allows Armed Forces Land Projects Agency to establish joint commercial enterprises with private firms.

SEPT 2017: El-Sisi's regime has sent 15,500 civilians to military court for political protest.

OCT 2019: Largest wave of mass arrests in Egypt's history. Over 2,300 peaceful protesters and journalists are detained in just 12 days

APRIL 2019: Constitutional amendments approved that strengthen military and judiciary and allow el-Sisi to remain in power until 2030.

ISSUE: In 2013, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized control of Egypt after a short-lived democratic revolution. Despite his claims to modernize Egypt, el-Sisi proceeded to solidify authoritarian rule. How does el-Sisi skillfully employ tactics that enforce oppression? And how did the dictator get a democracy-oriented coalition to back his oppressive regime?

Legitimizing Power through Repression and Antipluralism

The idea that legitimation and repression are disparate forces working against one another is a reductive assessment of legitimating tactics within authoritarian regimes. **Repression can, instead, function as a vehicle of legitimacy.**

el-Sisi attempts to realize and appropriate these legitimizing consequences of repression by **combining repressive actions with antipluralist justifications**. Through the coupling of repression and antipluralism, we see the emergence of a form of repressive action that not only disempowers the el-Sisi's main opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, but invalidates their existence. The Muslim Brotherhood is reduced from a viable populist response to el-Sisi's military regime into a dangerous enemy of Egypt.

To initiate this insidious combination of repression and antipluralism, el-Sisi **uses a facade of democratic governance, social reform, and freedom of press to distract from the repression and human rights abuses that characterize his authoritarian agenda**. Subsequently, el-Sisi de-legitimizes the opposition by **creating conspiracy theories that turn the opposition into a villain in an oversimplified battle of right vs. wrong**. Finally, el-Sisi appropriates his control of legality to institutionalize repression and designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.. These strategies are employed with the aim of simultaneously engendering legitimacy and affording el-Sisi's regime a hegemonic status, free from opposition.

Advancing and Co-opting Feminism

According to key metrics, women are doing better in the current regime of President el-Sisi than in the regimes of Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi. However, one should not confuse the advancement of women with genuine support of gender equality from the el-Sisi regime. **But the advancement of women should not be confused with genuine support of gender equality from the el-Sisi regime.**

In the 2014 constitutional rewrite, women used several strategies to gain ground towards gender equality, including networking within and beyond their social groups, coalition building, and collective bargaining. **As of 2021, the share of women in Parliament was 27.2%, the highest percentage since 1956.**

el-Sisi's general support of women's rights in Egypt has won him many female allies and the nickname "the women's president." He has issued statements speaking out against sexual harassment and has spoken about the advancement of women in international settings. Women in government choose to back el-Sisi because of his increased willingness to hear their platform compared to Morsi and the more socially conservative Muslim Brotherhood. However, one should suspect ulterior motives for el-Sisi's support. **By siding with the feminist movement, he is able to concurrently appear modern and portrays his biggest threat, the Muslim Brotherhood, as archaic.** It is clear that el-Sisi's government is in favor of women's rights in name only.

Strengthening the Military

In the 2019 constitutional amendments, el-Sisi's regime legalized authoritarianism by *rewriting* the military's constitutional mandate, *reconfiguring* the military's governance structure to slough off civilian oversight, and *reinforcing* military control over a significant portion of the national budget:

Rewrite: The amendment to Article 200 charges the military with "maintain[ing] the Constitution, democracy, the basic of civil state, as well as the people's gains, rights and freedoms." The amendment effectively legitimizes any domestic military action taken in the name of nebulous causes.

Reconfigure: The Article 234 amendment gives the military's statutory authority power to approve or veto the Minister of Defense for the next two full presidential terms.

Reinforce: Article 203 reinforces the military's full control over their budget and revenue. The clause requires only one member of parliament to assist the National Defense Council in creating the military budget. Neither parliament nor the public are informed of the itemized breakdown—only of the total value allocated.

As a party-less dictator, el-Sisi's regime skillfully employs the military to exert control. Given the military's reputation as a problem-solving entity that simultaneously embodies the spirit and will of the Egyptian people, el-Sisi allies himself with the best partner to maintain power. However, he does so at the risk of empowering the military to pursue their own agenda that one day may differ from his own.

FINDINGS: el-Sisi tightens his grip on Egyptian democracy through three main avenues: strengthening his military rule, supporting and co-opting feminism, and legitimizing his power through repressive and antipluralist narratives. This multi-pronged approach allows el-Sisi to construct a façade of modernism, liberal ideals, and progressive reform, while simultaneously strengthening his regime and framing any legitimate opposition, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as unthinkable and archaic. Through these skillfully employed tactics, el-Sisi has entrenched an authoritarian agenda and secured his power for years to come.

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