

Revelatory Elections – A State of Divide and Rule

by [Maged Atef \(/experts/maged-atef\)](#)

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Maged Atef is a freelance journalist based in Egypt. He has contributed to a number of publications, including Buzzfeed, Foreign Affairs, and the Daily Beast.



Brief Analysis

The Egyptian Commission for Presidential Elections has set March 26 for voting in Egypt (with March 16 as the start date for Egyptians abroad to vote). These elections come amid a kind of fog on the political stage. The outcome is predetermined, which is to favor President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, who has no true competitor in the race. Indeed, Sisi announced the timeframe for the elections while extending the State of Emergency for another three months. This enables Sisi's security apparatus to continue to censor the press, ban organizations, eavesdrop on citizens, and restrict their freedoms under the law. The role of the press—both official and unofficial—is to support the president and highlight his achievements in the past four years. Although these elections may be a sham, they do shed light on all sides of the equation, including the president, the opposition, and the army.

The president's moves with regard to these elections have alternated between two models. The first is the "Putin" model: the dominant strongman who pays no heed to what is said about him abroad. The second is the "Mubarak" model: where one keeps the appearance of a fictitious democracy for the Western press. The president's alternation between these two models became obvious in the pre-electoral period. When Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister to serve under Mubarak's regime, announced his intention to run for the presidency, he triggered the anger of Sisi's regime. The immediate result was a violent campaign led by the regime-affiliated media, who went so far as to accuse Shafiq of treason.

The United Arab Emirates, Sisi's closest ally, entered the scene, taking the decision to deport Shafiq from Abu Dhabi and ferry him off to Egypt. After Shafiq met with Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate, he disappeared for a while—before appearing once again to renounce his campaign. At this point, the attacks against him instantly stopped, and overnight Shafiq went back to being a loyal, patriotic man!

The phenomenon of removing candidates running for elections then repeated itself with greater violence. Lt. Gen. Sami Anan, former chief of the General Staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces, announced his wishes to run in the presidential elections. As a result, the Egyptian Army issued a statement accusing him of driving a wedge between the army and the people. In addition, he was accused of forging official documents, insofar as he did not obtain prior approval from the Armed Forces for his nomination. Within a few hours of this statement's publication, Anan was arrested right off the street in a degrading manner and led—according to the head of his electoral campaign—to an unknown place.

After less than a week, a brutal attack was launched against counselor Hisham Genena, former head of the Egyptian Central Auditing Organization and Anan's deputy. The attack took place in front of Genena's home and sent him to the intensive care unit. Angry voices rose on social media, accusing the regime of being behind this incident.

The abuse against Lt. Gen. Anan and his team, despite his being a former chief of staff of the Egyptian Army, prompted the prospective candidate and human rights lawyer Khaled Ali—who was also subjected to frivolous accusations—to withdraw from the presidential race. Ali characterized the spectacle as a farce, in which he had no desire to stand as a mere stage prop. Sisi's removal of all his potential competitors had turned the elections into a referendum on a single candidate who will become the president with the support of just 5 percent of voters registered in the electoral database.

At this point, the "Mubarak" model took over. Immediately, the state apparatuses sought to correct the matter, searching for a candidate to enter the electoral contest. Mustafa al-Bakri, a journalist close to the presidency, tweeted: "Sisi will not enter the electoral contest alone." Before long, an agreement was in the works to have the Wafd Party present a candidate against Sisi. However, in a surprise move, the party's Higher Committee refused to validate the nomination of party president El Sayed El Badawi as a candidate in the presidential elections—this after he had already declared his readiness to enter the race.

Thus, the regime found itself back at its starting point. What finally resolved the crisis was the announcement by Mousa Mostafa Mousa—president of al-Ghad, one of the parties loyal to the president—that he would enter the race.

Apart from the question of on-again, off-again candidates, something becomes clear from watching how the authorities have handled this process: there is no small amount of blunder here. While sidelining the two strong candidates—such as Shafiq and Anan—is understandable, the choice to make life difficult for candidates whose chance of winning is near nonexistent—such as Khaled Ali—is illogical. It indicates one of two things: either there are different wings behind the regime acting without coordination, or the president himself is unsure which of the models he wants to espouse, that of Putin or that of Mubarak.

Either way, it must be said that Sisi's autocratic rule benefits from the Egyptian opposition's fratricidal behavior. Some sectors have shown hostility to Sisi, whether openly, as in the case of the (now firmly underground) Muslim Brotherhood or the left, or covertly, as in the case of influential businessmen who are fed up with the military's encroachment on their sphere of operations.

Yet no sooner had Khaled Ali announced his intention to run for the presidency than attacks began to rain down on him from every direction. They came not only from the media outlets loyal to the regime—as would be expected—but also from a remarkable number of individuals affiliated with the opposition current. This latter group can be divided into three subgroups.

The first opposition faction opposed to Khaled Ali's candidacy was composed of a wide swath of those often called "Revolutionary Forces." Despite their cynicism toward the idea of change through the ballot box, these forces never present an alternative or even a vision for mechanisms to achieve the change they seek. This group took to social media to express their offense at Khaled Ali's candidacy, deeming that Ali was happily letting himself play the role of a disposable "extra" alongside Sisi, and thereby betraying the principles of the revolution!

The second faction is the left, which should in principle be among the firmest supporters of their kindred spirit Khaled Ali. Paradoxically, however, many of those on the left refused to support the leftist candidate. This reveals that Egyptian leftists are so divided that the regime can wholeheartedly ignore them.

As for Nasserists, they found an opportunity to settle their accounts with Khaled Ali and his supporters. This is punishment for their previous attack on Nasserist leader Hamdin Sabahi, who ran against Sisi in the 2014

presidential elections, which they called a mockery at the time. Amazingly, while Sabahi personally announced his support for Ali, these Nasserists were more royalist than the king and maintained their opposition to Ali. This is how Khaled Ali failed to unite the opposition—or to be more exact, this is how the opposition failed to unite to confront Sisi.

Much more relevant is the army, which has governed Egypt by proxy for long decades (Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak). But all three leaders, despite being military officers, practiced a division between the presidency and the army, such that the tanks stood behind the scene. This balance seemed stable, even with the army's expansion into economic projects during the second half of the Mubarak era, whose exact size and share of the market cannot be ascertained.

By contrast, under Sisi, military institutions are moving from backstage to the place of honor. The military is now directly in command, and no longer the hidden partner. Sisi believes that partnering with the military is what guarantees he will stay in power and maintain the country's stability.

Yet it is unclear just how much this serves the military institutions' interests, or contributes to national stability. Witness the recently leaked reports—unconfirmed but plausible—of a conflict between General Intelligence and Military Intelligence, leading to the dismissal of the General Intelligence head and his replacement by Abbas Kamel, the president's chief of staff. This took place a few days before the opening of the nomination period for the presidential elections.

More broadly, although there are no reports of serious divisions within the army to date, it is unprecedented that three former officers announced their intent to stand for election against General Sisi. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces grasped this and decided to act decisively against these attempts, thereby averting any repercussions within the army that could lead to uncontrollable disturbances.

Given all of the above, the upcoming elections are a foregone conclusion in more ways than one. Sisi remains the strongest single player and the one most capable of dominating, or even crushing, his adversaries. Abroad, he can lean on unconditional support from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as well as a compatibility verging on friendship with U.S. president Donald Trump. At home, Sisi has succeeded in consolidating his grip both on the street and on the security services, eliminating most of his adversaries within them. The fight between his remaining opponents, democratic or Islamist, and the internal divisions within each of those camps, have supported Sisi's position and consolidated his rule. Until further notice, Sisi is simply the sole player on the field in Egypt today.

THOMAS PARKER

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/thomas-parker>) RESPONDS:

I want to thank Mr. Maged Atef for his fine article on the upcoming Egyptian election. I read it several times with great pleasure and interest since Egypt is one of the most important countries in the world, and not just in the Arab world.

My comments here go beyond the scope Atef's analysis, looking forward to U.S. policy choices and toward Egypt's own longer-term political future.

What Should United States Policy Be Towards the Election?

The optimal U.S. approach towards these kinds of less than democratic elections, orchestrated by friendly governments such as Egypt's, always poses policy dilemmas. First, the U.S. does not want to undermine its relations with a political leader like President Sisi who will remain in power. So there is a tendency to ask why should we criticize an electoral process whose outcome is certain?

Second, the U.S. may have other priorities other than domestic governance. Most urgently right now, the U.S. needs Egypt's cooperation on North Korea since Cairo has purchased North Korean weapons and allowed North Korean diplomats to use their embassy in Egypt as a base for military sales across the region. Given that North Korea is approaching the capability of destroying North American cities, isolating North Korea is a major U.S. interest.

Third, some in the U.S. are privately ambivalent about genuine democratic elections in the Arab world under present circumstances. Might not free elections result in the election of authoritarian religious parties unfriendly to the U.S. and more repressive than the regimes they replace? This took place in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 and Hamas in 2007 in the Gaza Strip. One might argue that these autocratic religious regimes might not be re-elected, but of course, they rarely allow the political opposition to have a fair chance of regaining power through the ballot box.

What Can the U.S. Do?

Despite these considerations, the U.S. can and usually do use private diplomacy to urge friendly regimes to avoid excessively brutal tactics during these stage-managed elections. For example, the U.S. and European governments are almost certainly urging Egyptian authorities to avoid physically roughing up candidates. There is no excuse for the brutal attack against counselor Hisham Genena, former head of the Egyptian Central Auditing Organization and Lt. General Anan's deputy, which sent him to the intensive care unit, as recounted by Mr. Atef.

The Army Should Keep a Lower Profile

Mr. Atef usefully points out another developing danger to political stability. According to him, the Egyptian Army has become increasingly dominant in the Egyptian economy and it is no longer content with its role as a hidden political partner. Instead, President Sisi's partnership with the army is out in plain view for the entire country to see.

This may solidify the president's hold on power over the short term but it could jeopardize future political stability. Frustration with socio-economic conditions could easily begin to target the army itself. The lower the profile, the less the controversy, the greater the staying power.

Why President's Sisi's Next Term Should Be His Last

There is another potential danger for political stability in Egypt. Pro-government parliamentarians and media figures have been calling for the constitution to be amended to allow a president to have more than two four-year terms.

President Sisi said on CNBC television in November 2017 that he does not favor this: "I am for preserving two four-year terms and not changing it...We will not interfere with it." However, he later appeared to give himself some leeway in the interview, suggesting he might remain in power if it were in accordance with "the people's will." This hints at an orchestrated campaign whereby the president agrees to the "peoples' call" to stay in office for an eventual third term.

Egypt, including its ruling elite, has a strong interest in ensuring that President Sisi's second term is his final one. Part of the problem with the Mubarak model is that people understandably become restless with any leader, no matter how effective, after too many years in power. Egypt might well have been spared the travails of the political eruption in 2011 if there had been a regular succession within the ruling party. If any single Egyptian leader, including President Sisi, becomes too closely identified with the status quo, another political uprising is eventually likely.

Conclusion

One can make a case that successful democratic elections often need to proceed from a firm base of at least moderate economic prosperity and social modernity. Tunisia is an example, albeit a fragile one, of an Arab

democratic polity, slowly taking shape in tandem with relative economic and social progress – unlike the situation in Egypt.

But this does not mean that the Egyptian elections are a completely hollow exercise. As long as insightful and courageous observers like Mr. Atef can analyze and comment upon them, then there is hope that over the longer term, a freer political process can evolve as economic and social conditions improve.

Dr. Thomas Parker worked in the Executive Office of the President, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, the Intelligence Community and the U.S. Congress over the course of thirty years. He currently teaches security studies at George Washington University. ❖

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