

# Egypt's Also-Ran

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## Meet the man crazy enough to run for president against the new strongman in Cairo.

**W**hen millions of Egyptians cast their ballots for president next week, they will be participating in a virtual coronation. The outcome is a foregone conclusion: Former Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will win, probably by an astronomically high margin. Yet the fact that the affair will be considered an election at all is largely thanks to one man -- former parliamentarian and longtime Nasserist gadfly Hamdeen Sabahi, who will soon have the distinction of being the only man in Egypt's 7,000-year history to lose multiple presidential elections.

Sabahi, who finished a strong third in the 13-candidate 2012 presidential election, knows that the odds are severely stacked against him. "I think the political atmosphere says that there is a state candidate," he said, referring to Sisi, during an interview at his Giza-based office in early April. "I think this atmosphere does not give an equal competitive opportunity in this election."

Sabahi also hinted at the various constraints that have been placed on his campaign, including the arrest and assault of his supporters. And given his prominent role in campaigning for former President Mohamed Morsi's ouster last summer, Sabahi faces constant threats from the Muslim Brotherhood, and his movements are thus more restricted than during his previous presidential and parliamentary campaigns.

Yet despite the hopelessness of his relatively small campaign, Sabahi is making one important contribution to Egypt's political landscape. In an otherwise repressive political environment, he is working to preserve Egyptians' ability to challenge Sisi's emerging regime. "I am not an idealist who stays at home waiting for this state to be neutral," he told me. "For this reason, I believe in running for this presidential election so that democracy becomes a right."

In many respects, this is an unnatural role for Sabahi, who has embraced totalitarian ideas and rulers throughout his four decades as a prominent leftist activist. His political hero is Gamal Abdel Nasser, the former Egyptian president

who outlawed opposition parties and instituted one-party rule. But Sabahi hasn't limited his enthusiasm to Egyptian autocrats: He has been accused of receiving funds for his Nasserist movement from former Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi, and his name appeared following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq among those who had allegedly received funds from former dictator Saddam Hussein.

Sabahi considered Saddam an "Arab national hero," publicly praising the Iraqi tyrant during a 1994 appearance at one of Saddam's palaces. "Egypt loves you, Egypt stands by you, Egypt's heart is with you," a glowing Sabahi tells Saddam in a widely circulated YouTube video. "One of the mothers in the streets of my small hometown, Baltim, when she knew I was going to Iraq, she told me, 'My son, I entrust you to kiss Saddam Hussein.'"

In recent years, Sabahi has downplayed these associations by saying that he appreciated these leaders only for their anti-Western bent, not for their authoritarianism. When I asked Sabahi during a March 2013 interview how he could support a murderous figure like Saddam, Sabahi acknowledged that Saddam was "a dictator," but told me that he supported the Iraqi despot during the 1991 Gulf War because "for sure I will be with the Arab dictator against the dictator George Bush."

It was an odd comment, and I quickly pointed out that George H. W. Bush wasn't a dictator. "George Bush was elected in the United States," replied Sabahi. "But he was not elected to bomb the children in Iraq and kill them." This exchange was classic Sabahi: strident Arab nationalism with a dollop of clownishness.

Yet Sabahi's current campaign has been far from clownish. The candidate is taking this election extremely seriously and recalibrating his talking points to broaden his appeal beyond his Nasserist base, which largely prefers a strongman like Sisi anyway. So rather than highlighting Nasser's pan-Arabism, Sabahi now speaks of Nasserism as if it's a synonym for social democracy. "I am keeping the same values of Nasser like social justice," he told me in April, promising to reform Egypt's economy by means-testing energy subsidies and reducing the subsidies given to factories.

Sabahi is also targeting his message to Egypt's economic underclass, identifying poverty as the biggest "strategic threat" facing Egypt. Nearly half of Egypt's 86 million citizens live on less than \$2 per day, and plummeting foreign investment and tourism since the 2011 uprising has meant low growth rates and fewer jobs. "This is the soil where extremists come from, and those who are frustrated and despaired are ready to become suicide bombers," Sabahi told me.

He thus preaches the importance of economic development to repair Egypt's fraying social fabric. His approach to fighting terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula emphasizes a "comprehensive development plan" to attract foreign investment and a political program for combating anti-Bedouin discrimination in order to promote greater trust between Bedouin tribes and the state, in addition to the current "security confrontation" with jihadists.

On foreign policy, Sabahi is similarly abandoning Nasserist orthodoxies and embracing mainstream views within Egyptian politics. In this vein, he says he accepts Israel's existence and the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty as political realities, but won't meet with Israeli leaders. He also includes the United States and the European Union on the list of powers with which he anticipates having "balanced relations." And he favors a stronger role for Egypt in Africa, promising that, if elected, his first trip abroad will include stops in Sudan and Ethiopia, where he will try to resolve the Nile water crisis.

But despite Sabahi's sudden seriousness, the candidate faces an insurmountable shortcoming in the current political climate: Unlike Sisi, he isn't a "man of the state" -- and can therefore expect to find the country's institutions arrayed against him. In fact, a President Sabahi would be vulnerable to the same kind of insurrection from within Egypt's vast security apparatus that toppled Morsi last July.

In addressing these concerns, Sabahi slyly attacks Sisi. "Egyptians really need a man of the state, but not a state of

one man," he told me in April, effectively accusing Sisi of dictatorial ambitions.

Sabahi's criticism of Sisi has been more explicit in recent weeks. He blamed the former defense minister for violating human rights, accused him of being supported by figures from Hosni Mubarak's regime, and publicly cast doubt on his commitment to democracy. When I asked Sabahi whether he viewed Sisi as an emerging dictator, he said it was a possibility. "It depends on many factors. We are part of it. We are not going to allow him to be a dictator, and not anybody else."

Indeed, this is what Sabahi's candidacy is ultimately about -- building an alternative to Sisi and the strongman politics that he represents. But despite the earnestness with which Sabahi is pursuing this goal, there are two reasons his efforts will likely fall short.

First, while Sabahi is an alternative to Sisi, he can't be the alternative. The primary division within Egyptian politics remains that between Islamists and non-Islamists, and Sabahi's self-described "democratic Nasserism" maintains a very narrow following within the latter of those two camps. In this respect, Sabahi's candidacy is quite similar to liberal candidate Ayman Nour's 2005 campaign against Mubarak: Nour was simply another non-Islamist candidate, not a serious alternative to Mubarak's entrenched regime, and he ultimately garnered only 7.3 percent to Mubarak's 88.6 percent -- before the regime jailed him.

Second, the emerging regime won't allow Sabahi to establish himself as an alternative. The arrests of his campaign workers, as well as the violent assaults against his staff, represent warning shots should Sabahi press his case against Sisi too hard. And the regime knows that he might: Sabahi has four decades of experience in rallying protesters to the streets, and he personally mobilized his supporters during the 2011 and 2013 uprisings that catalyzed Mubarak's and Morsi's respective ousters. Given the current political climate -- in which not only Islamists but activists who campaigned for Morsi's toppling now sit in prison for resisting the current government's edicts -- Sabahi will likely be forced to choose between abiding by the regime's "red lines" as part of a "loyal opposition," or not politicking at all.

Still, there is always the remote possibility that Sabahi will surprise everyone -- say, by winning 25 percent of the vote. If that happens, it will indicate that significant opposition to Sisi exists even among those Egyptians who otherwise support the post-Morsi transition process. For this reason, Sabahi is an important test case for the extent to which competitive politics can and will exist under Sisi. More likely, however, he's a doomed canary in a toxic coal mine.

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