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Factionalism in the Security Sector: The Dawn of a New Order?

Egypt's formal political scene is tightly controlled as President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi strives to institutionalize military rule. However, the significant role played by different elements of the security sector in shaping the post-2013 political and economic environment risks further politicizing these agencies. The military, along with different intelligence services, constitutes the organizational backbone of Egypt's [...]

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NSA in charge of managing the parliamentary election scheduled between October and December 2020. These **tactics are likely to pay off**: pro-military forces are poised to dominate the ongoing contest. The Nation's Future Party (*Hizb Mustaqbal Watan*, NFP), founded in 2014 with the help of the military's Intelligence and Reconnaissance Administration (*Idara al-Mukhabarat al-Harbiya wa-l-Istitla'*),^[1] is likely to emerge from this process **as the dominant force**, and is possibly on its way to becoming a new ruling party, according to early indications from the first round of voting and the August 2020 elections for the reconstituted senate (*Maglis al-Shuyukh*).

This effort to impose a greater degree of control on the domestic political scene had already started in the run-up to the 2015 parliamentary election. President el-Sisi was confirmed in office with **97 percent of the vote in 2014**, buoyed by a wave of pro-military nationalism and a harsh security clampdown. Nevertheless, establishing control over parliamentary politics proved more challenging than expected. Hesitant to associate himself too closely with any political party, el-Sisi called on the different pro-state forces to form a united coalition. This task ultimately fell to the General Intelligence Directorate (*Gihaz al-Mukhabarat al-'Ama*, GID), which sponsored the emergence of the electoral list For the Love of Egypt (*Fi Hub Masr*, FLE). While FLE won all 120 seats allotted through the party-list tier of the 2015 election, the coalition proved ineffective with regard to the coordination of the 448 individual seats of the electoral contest. As a consequence, the FLE could not be relied upon **to guarantee a presidential majority in parliament**.

This was not due to any organized opposition, but to divisions within the pro-military camp. Following the 2015 election, this implicit competition was gradually decided in favor of the NFP, the military intelligence's player in the electoral arena. From 2018 onward, the NFP began to informally absorb both independent MPs as well as members of other parties, bringing their seat share to about 40 percent and thus making the NFP a plausible aspirant to be a pro-military majority party.^[2] The new electoral law enacted in June 2020 increased the proportion of parliamentary seats filled via the closed list tier of the parallel electoral system to half of the 568 seats. This is likely to facilitate a stable majority and will play out in favor of the NFP in the ongoing contest.

Disagreements within the security establishment **were also visible in presidential elections**. While President el-Sisi did not face serious opposition in either the 2014 or 2018 elections, signs of competition emerged within the military in 2018. Formally, el-Sisi ran against Moussa Mustafa Moussa, the chairman of the Ghad (Tomorrow) Party who had played an important role in marginalizing Ayman Nour in the wake of the latter's unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2005 (the country's first multi-candidate presidential election). In 2018, he was the only opposition candidate to run against el-Sisi.

From the perspective of the Egyptian regime, **opposition from within the military was a matter of concern**. In December 2017, former Prime Minister and Air Force General Ahmad Shafiq announced his intention to challenge el-Sisi from his exile in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Shafiq was subsequently expelled from Abu Dhabi and placed under house arrest upon his arrival to Cairo: he ultimately reconsidered his candidacy and withdrew from the race. A second challenge was mounted by the former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Sami Anan, who announced his intention to run against el-Sisi in January 2018. Anan was arrested for not having sought prior approval for his candidacy from the military and remained in custody until December 2019.

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Complicating Politics: The Military's Mega-Projects

Largely behind the scenes, the EAF has also significantly **expanded its economic interests since 2013**. President el-Sisi has staked his administration's claim for legitimacy on a number of "mega projects" (notably the Suez Canal expansion, the new administrative capital east of Cairo, the construction of a number of desert cities for upper- and lower-income housing), trying to further consolidate the military's control over the Egyptian economy.^[4]

While frequently of questionable value for the national economy, these mega projects **feed directly into the military economy**. Subcontracts are awarded to military-connected companies, the EAF increased their control over the special economic zone along the Suez Canal, the Ministry of Defense controls the construction of the new capital city, and the military has seen the value of their landholdings increase considerably. Beyond mega projects, the networks associated with the Egyptian military economy have also expanded into areas such as mobile communications and infrastructures, and stepped up their involvement in meat and poultry retail.

The EAF's economic expansion **has not proceeded without friction** and, at times, further complicates party-political dynamics. As the main beneficiaries of the dismantling of Mubarak-era economic networks, military actors are clashing with private business interests as well as other state agencies, in particular the GiD. As Shana Marshall has suggested, the dramatic expansion of the Egyptian military's involvement in the economy is a sign of an "emerging ruling class, alternately absorbing or jettisoning the remnants of Mubarak's rule."^[5]

The risks of unregulated competition in the security sector

What does this mean for Egypt's overall political stability? Challenges to the post-2013 political-military balance do not come from any organized opposition, but from **the regime's inability to institutionalize the rules of political and economic competition**. In the absence of such rules, the unregulated competition among different networks entrenched in the security sector, which has characterized political and economic processes since 2013, is bound to weaken the very institutions on which the el-Sisi regime relies. Whether the president has the political capital and will to rein in state capture by military actors remains to be seen; what is clear is that Egyptians will pay the price for his failure to do so.

[1] See Hossam Bahgat, 'Anatomy of an election,' Mada Masr, 14 March 2016. <https://bit.ly/3ky6Vi4> (<https://bit.ly/3ky6Vi4>).

[2] 26 أحمدهممدوحومحمدسعيد، مستقبل وطن يقترب من الاستحواذ على الأغلبية البرلمانية، أخبار اليوم، May 2018. <https://bit.ly/2TuplyF>.

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