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Egypt after the presidential elections

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INTRODUCTION

On March 26th, 27th and 28th, 2018, Egyptians voted to re-elect their President of the Republic, Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, in the virtual absence of an alternative candidate, and in a political context eminently unfavorable to the exercise of civil liberties. Widely presented in the international media as totally meaningless, these elections clearly differed with those of May-June 2012, which had seen a confrontation of five rival political projects, in a climate of almost total uncertainty as to the final results. Nevertheless, since the end of the 1970s, political scientists consider that the study of elections in an authoritarian context is instructive in the sense that they constitute key moments in the evolution of state-society relations. They help to explain the strategy of the elites, and even to guess the state of the balance of power of a society. In this sense, the last Egyptian presidential elections are no exception, and their study should not be neglected on the pretext that their results were largely predictable¹.

I – A political context marked by the quest for stability

The 2018 presidential election is the second to be organized under the Constitution of 2014. The main challenge is therefore to show that the regime resulting from the events of June 30th and July 3rd, 2013 still has an important popular base, and therefore represents a guarantee of stability, which is its main source of legitimacy, both domestically and internationally.

In May 2014, Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi was elected with 25.3 million votes, against 758,000 for his only challenger, Hamdine Sabbahi, while the latter had managed to attract 4.8 million votes on his name in the first round of the May 2012 elections. This result showed the immense popularity of President Sissi, almost uncontested champion of the secular camp. He was elected with almost twice as many votes as his deposed predecessor,

¹ My field work on the presidential elections of 2018 has been made possible thanks to the financial support of the project: « Power and Strategies of Social and Political Order »: <http://power.orient.cas.cz>

Mohammed Morsi, winner of the second round in June 2012 with 13.2 million votes, obtained at the end of the first democratic presidential elections in Egyptian history.

The elections of March 2018 showed how this popularity had withstood the test of four years of power. During President Sisi's first term, many reforms were undertaken on diverse fronts, and it seemed inevitable – given the extremely heterogeneous nature of the coalition of June 30th that serves as a social and political basis for the regime – that these reforms cost him some of his support. Indeed, if the economic measures taken in the framework of the loan granted by the IMF at the end of 2016 (introduction of VAT, gradual reduction of subsidies, devaluation of the pound) have brought fresh air to the public finances and have benefited the financial sector and tourism, they have also caused a deterioration in the standard of living of the poorest populations, due to inflation affecting in particular food and transport. On the other hand, the regime's extensive "de-liberalisation" of public freedom and human rights has alienated some of the liberal and socialist sectors of public opinion, whilst the continuation of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies puts the Salafist party Nour – which still supports the regime – at odds with its militant base and electorate.

Finally, even among the former members of the National Democratic Party (PND), the mainstay of the Mubarakian system, there is disappointment due to the apparent will of the regime to leave them only a marginal place in the political system, in favour of a rise in power of the army, and the intention to form a new political and administrative elite resulting young graduates.

President Sisi, however, has had significant achievements in the assets of his first term. These are financed by a loan from the IMF and by investments from international actors (primarily from the Gulf countries) anxious to stabilise Egypt. There are also resources released as a result of the liberal economic reforms mentioned above, and by those – anticipated – linked to the discovery of the gas field al-Zohr. Thus, besides the major works (improvement of the capacities of the Suez Canal, construction of a new administrative capital), the government invested in the improvement of transport, and announced recently its will to do the same for the development North Sinai – a province in which repressive politics alone seem powerless to overcome an armed Islamist insurgency now linked to the Islamic State. Furthermore, in December 2017, the Parliament adopted a law providing for the gradual extension of social security coverage by 2032. If this government has shown a repressive face in terms of morality (repression against the LGBT community, bill to criminalise atheism, persecution of several artists for "incitement to debauchery"), it has adopted a more progressive attitude in the matter of legal equality (improvement of the political representation of women and Christians – but also of young people and the disabled – reform of the law on places of worship, discussions around the idea of introducing civil marriage into Egyptian legislation).

Thus, the social contract presented by the regime can be stated as follows : deterioration (supposedly temporary, but of indefinite duration) of the condition of the greatest number (in terms of both civil liberties and living standards) in favor of structural reforms that have been periodically postponed by the Mubarak regime (and that neither the transitional regime of the High Council of the Armed Forces nor the elected one of the Muslim Brotherhood was in a position to implement), which are expected to improve the everyday life of Egyptians. For those in power, the issue of the presidential elections was to show that this social contract always benefited from the assent, if not the support, of a large part of the Egyptian population.

2 – Depoliticized elections

These elections were marked by the notable absence of opposition candidates. Their presence would certainly have changed the meaning of the ballot, making it a means of measuring the support offered by different sectors of the public opinion to alternative political projects, compared to those of the outgoing president. As a result, the vote in favor of Sissi would have naturally been politicized, whereas in the context of an unique candidate, the vote was depoliticized. It was presented as a civic or rather a patriotic gesture, expressing nothing but an attachment to the country. However, despite the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies from the political arena, and despite the rallying of almost all the secular forces (reinforced by the Salafists of the Nour party) to the regime resulting from the "revolution of June 30th", alternative candidacies began to emerge at the end of 2017 but were subsequently suppressed.

Initially, the organisation of the polls permitted different political options to assert themselves publicly, and this step was completed when applications were submitted on January 29th, 2018. It brought to light the dissatisfaction amongst supporters of the old regime – which resulted in the announcement of the candidacy of several officers or former officers – but also revealed the tension created by the expression of this dissension in the security system, and in the presidency itself. The first soldier to have announced his willingness to present himself, as of November 2017, was a near-unknown Colonel Ahmed Konsowa. On December 2nd, he was arrested and brought before a military court for publicly running for president without prior authorization from his superiors. The second candidacy was more serious, since it was that of General Ahmed Shafiq, former Minister of Civil Aviation under Mubarak. He was temporary Prime minister, having been appointed during the 2011 revolution, before becoming in 2012 finalist of the presidential election against the Muslim brother Mohamed Morsi (5.5 million votes in the first round, and 12.3 million in the second, or 48.27% of voters). At the time, Ahmed Shafiq was the candidate of supporters of the order, willing to put an end to the revolution. Following the announcement of the results of the second round,

which were unfavorable to him, he fled to the United Arab Emirates. From there, he announced his candidacy, also in November 2017, before stating that he was prevented from leaving the UAE. On December 2nd, he was expelled from that country to Egypt, where he was intercepted by the security services as soon as he arrived at the airport. On January 7th, 2018, he formally renounced his candidacy. In the end, the final candidate from the ranks of the army had more weight perhaps even than that of Ahmed Shafiq, since it was General Sami Annan, former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, and vice-president. He was President of the High Council of the Armed Forces when he assumed all the powers in the period of vacancy opened by the resignation of Mubarak.

Having retired, he made his candidacy public on January 19th, joined by former chairman of the public accounting authority Hesham Genina. Genina became a figurehead in the fight against corruption due to his dismissal following the publication of a report on the cost of corruption in Egypt. On January 23rd, 2018, Sami Annan was arrested on charges of falsifying documents.

Several civilians also announced their willingness to run, before withdrawing their candidacy a few days before the deadline of January 29th. The best known of them was the lawyer Khaled Ali, already a candidate in the presidential elections of 2012, after which he obtained 134,000 votes (0.58% of the votes cast). Khaled Ali is best known in Egypt for his commitment to workers' organisations and against corruption. Member of a small left party called "Bread and Freedom", he announced in May 2017 that he would run for president. On January 24th, 2018, however, he withdrew his candidacy, explaining that his chief concern was to protect his supporters from the repression of which they were victims. Another candidate from the civilian world had given up a few days earlier, on January 15th, also denouncing the conditions surrounding the organisation of the poll. This was Mohamed Anouar al-Sadate, nephew of former President Sadat, who had distinguished himself by his reformist positions in the last years of the reign of Mubarak, positions that led him to found the party Reform and Development (PRD). During the transition period, this party defended the military regime of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and was thus assimilated into the forces of the old regime during the legislative elections of 2011-2012. During this time he won ten deputies. After 2013, however, the PRD became increasingly critical of President Sissi's policies. In the legislative elections of 2015, he managed to elect only three deputies, including Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat himself. The latter then quickly became the main figure of the parliamentary opposition, in particular following his accession to the leadership of the Assembly's Human Rights Committee. On February 28th, 2017, he was deprived of his deputy seat by a vote of two thirds of the House, on the pretext that he had sent bills to foreign embassies.

But while the security apparatus directly hindered the possible proposition of candidates from the military – always likely to create or aggravate possible dissensions within its

ranks – civilian candidates have also apparently been victims of the excessive zeal by Sissi supporters in the media and in the administration. They were portrayed as traitors, and sympathizers seeking to show support for any candidate other than the outgoing president were persecuted (statements of support were required by law for the registration of an application). However, the absence of alternative candidacies to Sissi was bad for the image of the regime. To counteract this, various personalities were approached by individuals close to power, and asked to be candidates. The first of them was Al-Sayyid al-Badawy, President of the Wafd party, who announced his candidacy on January 26th, only three days before the deadline for filing with the Electoral Commission. However, the next day, the Wafd party's high committee rejected the candidacy of its president, preferring to support Sissi's candidacy. Moreover, Mortada Mansour, president of a great Cairo football club and member of Parliament, renounced on January 27th without giving any explanation.

In the end, only Moussa Moustafa Moussa faced the outgoing president. On January 29th, the last day of the files before the Electoral Commission, he announced his candidacy, which he registered fifteen minutes before the closing of the Commission offices. Unknown to the general public, Moussa Moustafa Moussa is the son of a former Wafd party figure, and a businessman like his father before him. He graduated from the National School of Architecture of Versailles and he is an excellent French speaker. In 2005, he joined the Ghad party ("the party of the next day") created a year earlier by a dissident Wafd, Ayman Nour, also the main candidate opposed to Mubarak in the first pluralist presidential election held that year.

Moussa became vice-president of the new party, and while Ayman Nour was imprisoned (having been accused of presenting false certificates of support for the legalization of his party), he seized the direction of the Ghad, despite opposition of supporters of Ayman Nour. This internal coup – finally endorsed by the courts in 2011 -had, according to rumors, received the support of Mubarak's police. They were eager to deprive of all resources that most virulent opponent, Ayman Nour. The announcement of the candidacy of Moussa Moustafa Moussa in January 2018 met with skepticism, both from observers and from the Egyptian people. Moussa made no attempt to hide his support for President Sissi. The Ghad party was deprived of its most dynamic elements but remained loyal to Ayman Nour, leader of the party of the Day after the Revolution, before denouncing in 2013 the « coup d'État » of July 3rd and following into exile the supporters of the deposed president. It does not have a real organisation or militant base, and few resources beyond the personal fortune of its president.

Such conditions pushed some of the opposition to call for abstention, but the campaign for a boycott of elections was also quickly crushed. On January 28th, Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat, Hicham Genina, Hazem Hosni (ephemeral campaign director Sami Annan) and scientist Issam Higgi signed an open letter calling for the boycott of the elections because

of the "climate of fear" surrounding them. The Islamist Abdel-Monim Abul-Futuh also appeared amongst the signatories of the letter. Longtime leader of the liberal current within the Muslim Brotherhood, he had been excluded from the organisation in the summer of 2011, because of his willingness to run for the presidential elections of 2012. Benefiting from considerable support, he obtained 4.1 million votes (17.47% of the votes cast) in the first round, ranking fourth behind Mohammed Morsi, Ahmed Safiq and Hamdine Sabbahi. Representative of a political Islam seeking compatibility with the values of liberal democracy, he founded in the wake of the presidential elections of 2012 the party of powerful Egypt. Despite being critical of the Muslim Brotherhood's experience of power, he did not applaud their overthrow by the army in 2013. In the constitutional referendum of 2014, he called at first for a no vote, before turning to abstention due to the repression encountered by its activists during their attempts to campaign. Similarly in 2018, he considered the idea of being a candidate before joining the camp of supporters of the boycott. On January 31st, 2018, Hamdine Sabbahi also called for abstention. On February 13th, Hisham Genina was arrested and brought before the military prosecutor, followed the next day by Abul-Futuh.

3 – Voters mobilized by different means

The regime was thus faced with a problem: how to massively mobilize voters to participate in elections, despite the absence of an opposition, whilst refusing any politicization of the public debate? It became chaotic, combining the clientelism characteristic of the Mubarakian system – but without having a hegemonic party like the NDP – with its own specific methods, such as the corporatization of the media and existing political parties.

Mubarak's system was indeed in crisis for nearly a decade before the start of the revolution of January 2011. This was because of a growing difficulty in maintaining the unity of the PND, supreme organiser of customer networks that linked the regime to Egyptian society. While the NDP had been structured, since the end of the Sadatian era, around the traditional local elites (tribes, big families, landowners, men of religion, etc.), its equilibrium had been threatened since the end of the 1990s by the rise of businessmen from the *infitah*, the economic opening launched by Sadat two decades earlier. The owners of the vast fortunes created by this new economic policy increasingly sought to integrate political life, thus competing with the regime's traditional support. The symptoms of this crisis were on the one hand the exacerbation of competition between the different candidates, all proclaiming to represent the NDP, and ever more numerous in each constituency with the different legislative deadlines; and secondly the opposition between an "old guard" of the party grouped behind figures having entered politics under

Nasser, and a "young guard" led by the son of the president, Gamal Mubarak, and the steel magnate Ahmed Ezz.

Thus, the two most prominent features of the NDP – both an apolitical network of clientele, and a space for confrontation between conservatives and reformers – made it unsuitable for survival in the context of the political overture following the fall of Mubarak. In this perspective, its dissolution by the court on April 16th, 2011 – on the grounds of "corruption of political life" – probably accelerated its dislocation rather than provoked it. The absence of a clear ideological line manifested by the PND favored the dispersion of a part of its clientele and its re-alignment on functional or cultural lines of division. The internal fight between conservatives and reformers was reflected in this new context by the competition on the electoral market for various authoritarian restoration projects or gradual reforms of the regime. In fact, the year 2011 was marked by a general saving-can-members of the former PND, under the sobriquet of *feloul*, a term designating the "residue of a routed army." During the 2011 elections, many of them sought the nomination of liberal political parties, even Islamists, to save their seats as MPs. In addition to this political recycling, some pre-existing parties were invested by supporters of the old regime, while others were created specifically to defend an authoritarian restoration project. Founded mainly on business networks, often with a local dimension, these parties proved failed to unite, and succeeded in electing only about ten deputies.

It was only during the 2012 presidential elections that these networks managed to crystallize temporarily in supporting two candidates with two competing projects: Ahmed Shafiq, candidate of the authoritarian restoration (or at least the stopping of the revolutionary process), and Amr Moussa, candidate for the gradual reform of the system. Significantly, Ahmed Shafiq was not supported by any political party, while Amr Moussa federated the moderate liberals (such as the Wafd party, and Moussa Moustafa Moussa's Ghad party) and former PND reformers². He finally ranked fifth, with 11.1% of the votes cast, or nearly 2.6 million votes. However, Ahmed Shafiq's election campaign – despite having succeeded in placing his candidate in second position behind the Muslim Brotherhood – did not serve as a basis for the creation of a party-oriented organisation aiming for a possible seizure of power. From the end of 2012, the supporters of the old regime joined the protest against President Morsi and also the Muslim Brotherhood. However, they were careful not to highlight the National Salvation Front, led by the triumvirate Hamdin Sabbahi, Mohammed Al-Baradei and Amr Moussa.

Following the army's takeover of the country in the summer of 2013, the *feloul* became more visible in the media and administrations, but even in these eminently favorable conditions – those of an authoritarian restoration – they once again faced the 2015

² Bahgat, « Anatomy of an Election », Mada Masr (online), March 14th, 2016 – <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/03/14/feature/politics/anatomy-of-an-election/>, consulted on July 3rd, 2018.

parliamentary elections in a disorganised manner. Indeed, despite the efforts made by part of the state apparatus to unite Sissi's supporters, the 2015 elections faced at least two competing attempts to restore the link between society and the broken state; by the dislocation of the PND and the creation of a political party – the party of the Future of the Fatherland – which aimed to incubate future modernising elites; and by the constitution of an electoral coalition – "for the sake of Egypt » – seeking to unite political parties and "personalities" supporting the president. These two attempts had in common the desire to modernise the relationship between the state and society; firstly by replacing the traditional elites with a new elite resulting from the fusion of the young revolutionaries joining the regime with representatives of various professional organisations and technocrats from administrations; and secondly, by drowning them in a larger whole whose hard core would be constituted by political parties with a more or less defined ideology (reformers, liberals, even socialists).

In 2018, however, as neither of these two projects matured, Sissi's election campaign was once again marked by the absence of a single support organisation. There was not one official campaign, but several³. These were assisted by different political parties; by state, parastatal and civil society institutions; by most independent deputies (who constituted the majority of the elected Parliament in 2015), and by business leaders. Numerous traders and private companies displayed pro-Sissi banners on all the major roads and traffic nodes. For example, in Agami, in the industrial suburbs of Alexandria, the steel mills of Ahmed Ezz (the former leader, alongside Gamal Mubarak, the "young guard" of the PND) showed their support for Sissi, just like the workers' clubs from different factories. At the national level, two businessmen – Al-Sharqawi (catering) and Swidi (car dealer) – played an important role in organising the pro-Sissi campaign from outside of political parties. The latter were not excluded from this campaign, but occupied a jump seat. Thus, the party of the Future of the Fatherland, of course, but also the national party of Egypt (former election feloul party of 2011 that had virtually disappeared from the political scene in the meantime), the liberal parties Wafd and Free Egyptians, and even Salafists of the Nour Party, organised pro-Sissi meetings. MPs campaigned in their districts. But parties and elected officials were only a backup force in these elections, alongside trade unions and professional orders, religious organisations (Sufi brotherhoods, but also Salafist Preaching and various Christian organisations), associations, sports clubs, etc.

On March 19th, for example, several support meetings for Sissi took place under the umbrella of the "Kullinâ ma'ak" campaign, organized either by the university (in Port Saïd) or the municipal club (in Mansoura), or by a member of the constituency (in Tanta). The same day, in the wake of the official visit of the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, the party of the Future of the Fatherland organized a rally in the Cairo stadium, where

³ Tahiya Masr (« Vively Egypt »), Kullinâ ma'ak (« We are all with you »), Min agl Masr (« For Egypt »), Yalâ Sissi (« Go Sissi »), Muwatan (« Citizen »), Da'am Masr (« Support Egypt »).

President Sissi himself spoke to thank the overseas voters (who had then already voted). On the same day, in the Madinty garden of the new capital, a support party for Sissi was organized by the campaign "Min agl Masr", with concerts of several Egyptian singers, and the entry was free. For the duration of the campaign, moreover, there were festivals in the streets (dance, music and flags held) attracting mostly young people. The official anthem of the campaign was the song of an army corps: "alu eh?" ("What did they say?"). The mobilisation speech had a quasi-military dimension. On news channels, a slogan kept coming up: "Every voice is a bullet in the hearts of traitors". Other slogans were nevertheless more measured, such as: "Security is the first of human rights". But despite being non-violent, the campaign clips were very emotional, as for example Da`wa ("A Call"), in which a *foul*⁴ seller receives an envelope containing a child's drawing representing a boat, as well as an invitation to vote. In the end, Moussa Moustafa Moussa was almost absent from the media, and his campaign material appeared only in places where foreigners are likely to go (in front of railway stations- near the embassies and Tahrir Square, in the Zamalek upscale residential neighbourhood) and close to his party's headquarters in Cairo. The very discretion of the only competing candidate to the incumbent president made it possible in many cases to conceal the calls to vote Sissi. Behind the aspect of a "civic" speech lay an incitation to simply "participate" in the elections. As a result, the neutrality of the state and the media was formally respected.

Beyond its organizational and emotional aspects, the election campaign was also marked by the carrots and stick technique. On the one hand, the state threatened the abstentionists with a fine (a threat that was regularly brandished during the elections in Egypt, but never put into effect) and – according to several testimonies⁵ – the employees of different administrations and companies were coerced into going to vote with threats of seeing their future advancement blocked by the hierarchy; and on the other hand, butcher and grocery trucks chartered by Tahiya Masr and the Ministry of the Interior under the name Amân provided voters with food at a price lower than on the market. Informal collective bargaining had in any case probably occurred in various enterprises, administrations and universities, since on March 28th (last day of voting), the television showed female students going to vote en masse in the governorate of Daqqaliyya, as well as the workers of Mahalla all going to the polls together at the exit of the factory.

⁴ Popular meal with *fava* beans, often sold in a road behind a basic equipment and carried in cart.

⁵ See, for example, Mohie and W. Ahmed, « Sugar, rice and everything nice: mobilizing voter turnout in Egypt's presidential election », Mada Masr (online), March 28th, 2018 – <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/03/28/feature/politics/sugar-rice-and-everything-nice-mobilizing-voter-turnout-in-egypts-presidential-election/>, consulted on July 6th, 2018.

4 – Results enable the plan to continue its momentum

Even though the participation figures were in absolute numbers comparable to those of 2014 (24.3 million against 25.3), there was a decline in the participation rate (41.5% against 47.5%) in comparison to the number of potential voters, which at the same time increased (59.1 million against 53.6). Another indicator of the erosion of the president's popularity is the dramatic increase in the number of blank votes (1.8 million in 2018, compared to 1 million in 2014). Thus, even if these figures were high- and perhaps even higher than the supporters of the regime hoped for, since a leaflet distributed a few days earlier had estimated that ten million votes would be enough to silence Sissi's criticisms of abroad – they betray, however, a rise in the dissatisfaction of certain sectors of opinion, especially as the electoral mobilisation seemed on the whole much less spontaneous than four years earlier.

Be that as it may, and despite calls from part of the pro-Sissi liberal opinion to make the president's second term one of restoring civil liberties, a new wave of repression followed, targeting the election of many opponents related to the revolution of January 25th. In addition, a new press law was adopted by the Parliament in June, extending press offenses to social media accounts with more than 5,000 subscribers. And finally, on the side of the most conservative supporters of the regime, several voices called for a change in the Constitution, to give Sissi the freedom to seek new mandates. This reform would also remove the legal obstacles preventing MPs from changing party affiliation during the term of office. The project to restore the link between the state and society – unanimously supported by the elite – consisted of the merging of existing political parties. This would unite them into three or four effective partisan organisations with a clearly defined ideology. Despite pressure from the authorities, there were two obstacles: the leaders of the parties in question were reluctant to drown themselves in a larger whole that would cost them their positions, and almost all of the parties concerned preferred – in the event of a merger – to join a party of the presidential majority without an ideological identity. They didn't want to risk being in the opposition, even if it was "constructive" and integrated into the parliamentary system. The future elections – local elections in 2019 and legislative elections in 2020 – were likely to accompany a new restructuring of the Egyptian partisan system, but probably more modestly than had been hoped for.

The great challenge of the second term remained that of state reform and local government. The 2014 Constitution provided for the delegation of powers to elected local authorities, as well as the autonomy of these local authorities at all levels. Nonetheless, the local assemblies elected in 2008 (the *mahalliyat*) were dissolved in June 2011, and have never been re-elected since. Although the law governing future local elections has been under discussion in Parliament since 2017, it has still not been voted.

One of the difficulties facing MEPs is that the 2014 Constitution imposed numerous constraints on the legislator in this area, especially in terms of quotas (women, Christians, young people, disabled people). The other difficulty was the illisibility of the Egyptian political landscape, which made it complicated to predict the effects of this or that electoral system on the distribution of power between the supporters, variously critical, of the regime. In other words, it would undoubtedly prove difficult to control the outcome of the ballot. Local government reform was nonetheless required by both the international context (donor pressure for "good governance") and by the popular demand for participation in local affairs. This gave an excuse for local governance to curb the surge of political activity that had begun in 2011, and to abandon – for the time being at least – any potential revolution. The reform was therefore seen as one of the means to put an end to the state crisis which had broken out during the Arab Spring and which had led subsequently to the collapse of several countries in the region. The Egyptian state having survived this crisis, it was now necessary to change its relationship to its environment and, starting with its own society, to lay the foundations for a lasting stability. Such an objective required the reduction of the most glaring social inequalities, beginning with the territorial imbalance that had led to the extreme polarisation of the Egyptian political landscape during 2012-2013. It was this that had led to the failure of the transition initiated in February 2011.