Democracy and Authoritarianism in Egypt Today

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Abstract
In this paper, we analyze the political system of Egypt under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi between 2016 and 2024. The article aims to reveal whether there are still some democratic elements or if the country has rather a classical authoritarian system. To answer this question, we used relevant democracy criteria as analytical tools. Methodologically, we conducted this study through a literature review and an expert interview with an Egyptian political scientist. Based on the findings on vertical accountability, political rights, civil liberties, and horizontal accountability, Egypt has quite an authoritarian regime with few democratic elements.

Keywords: Egypt, Democracy, Authoritarianism, Current Politics

Introduction
Egypt has witnessed dramatic political changes in the last thirteen years. In 2011, huge demonstrations against authoritarian long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak erupted across the country. The protests in Egypt were not a single phenomenon but part of a regional protest wave that was soon called the Arab Spring, not only in Egypt but also in many countries of the Middle East. In Egypt, after 30 years (1981-2011) in power, as a result of a people power uprising against his authoritarian regime, Hosni Mubarak had to resign, and his authoritarian rule transformed into a more democratic political order. In 2012, opposition leader Mohamed Morsi was elected to be the country’s new president in 2012. There were many historical similarities between the end of General Suharto’s Orde Baru and the beginning of the Reform Era in Indonesia.

Unlike in Indonesia, the military led by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, started a successful coup and removed the democratically elected President Morsi in July 2013. The military argued that Morsi was authoritarian, an Islamist, incompetent, and failed to address the economic and security challenges (BBC News, 2013). Al-Sisi claimed that he acted in response to the will...
of the Egyptian people and that the Army had “a moral, national, and historic responsibility. Egypt enters a dark tunnel of conflict, internal strife, civil war or collapse of state institutions” (Mandour, 2018).

When al-Sisi overthrew the elected government, he appointed a civilian, Adly Mansour, as interim president and promised that he had no intentions to run for president. He also assured Egyptians and the international community that Egypt would remain a civilian-controlled country. He also promised to protect the freedoms and protections of all Egyptians (DAWN, 2021). On several occasions, al-Sisi argued that his republic was built on the foundations of modernity and democracy” (Middle East Monitor, 2023).

In this article, we would like to take a closer look at the political developments in Egypt and analyze whether the country is really based on democratic principles. Our research questions are: How can the current system of government be assessed? Are there still some democratic elements, or is it a classical authoritarian system? In the Freedom House Report 2024, Egypt is listed as a not-free country with a democratic decline in the last 10 years (Freedom House, 2024). As explained in more detail in Chapter 2. We will apply democracy criteria as the theoretical framework for our assessment. These criteria allow us to identify and measure various aspects of full-fledged democracy and the deviations from the ideal type of democracy. Our case study shall be a part of the general academic debate on the development of democracy worldwide. Political developments in Egypt are relevant not only for the Arab World and the Middle East but also on a global scale. According to World Population Review, Egypt had more than 114 million inhabitants in 2024 and is the 14th most populated country worldwide (World Population Review, 2024), which underlines the relevance of political development in this country.

**Theoretical Framework and Research Method**

Regarding methodology, we relied on a careful and thorough literature review, mostly from academic sources but, in some cases, also from journalistic articles. Most of the literature research was searched online by using academic and non-academic online search engines. There are a huge number of academic publications dealing with Egypt’s current political system, and most of them are critical of the quality of democracy.

To receive first-hand information, we conducted an online interview with Dr. Amr Adly, who is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science of the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt. The interview occurred on February 20, 2024, and lasted for around one hour. A few weeks later, we sent a draft article to Dr. Amr Adly, who replied that he agreed with our quotations for this article.

For the theoretical framework for conceptualizing democracy, we needed to develop criteria for the assessment. The classic example of defining democracy is the ten criteria of democracy presented by Robert Dahl in his polyarchic model (Dahl 1971). Since then, scholars have come to a consensus that the term "democracy" includes at least two key elements: free and fair elections and pluralism/competition. This minimal definition declares that electoral competition and open participation are core elements of democracy.

While a liberal democracy necessarily includes civil liberties and elections, it must take into account the potential for executive abuse, human rights violations, unconstitutional veto targets, and corrupt practices that undermine the quality of democracy. Elections and civil liberties alone do not prevent these undemocratic practices. Thus, Dahl's definition of democracy presents only the minimal criteria of democracy.

Leonardo Morlino argues that the indicators for assessing the quality of democracy are hierarchically linked. For him, unlike Dahl, independent courts and the rule of law constitute “a precondition for all other dimensions” (Morlino, 2004). The rules of democracy may be perfect. However, until no one diligently enforces those rules and punishes violators, the political order cannot work properly in a democratic sense. Therefore, institutions such as an independent parliament, courts, and the...
Supreme Court are important elements in maintaining the essence of democracy.

Based on these considerations, German political scientists Aurel Croissant and Wolfgang Merkel developed the concept of embedded democracy (Merkel & Croissant 2004; Merkel, 2004), which is based on five interdependent partial regimes necessary for an embedded democracy: electoral regime, political participation, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and the power of the elected representatives to govern.

We will use the criteria and modify them so far, as we did not include the criterion “power of elected representative to govern” and also refrain from looking at the external influences on domestic developments in Egypt.

Therefore, we will use for our analysis of the political system in Egypt the following four democracy criteria, which are essential for an ideal form of democracy, as proposed by the concept of embedded democracy: a) free, fair, and competitive elections (vertical accountability), b) political rights, c) civil liberties, and d) horizontal accountability. In the following, we will briefly explain these criteria.

Most academics would agree that elections are the most decisive element of a democracy. However, the mere holding of elections alone does not automatically mean that a country is democratic. In a full-fledged democracy, it must be ensured that the elections are free, fair, and competitive. Or, as Wolfgang Merkel put it, “open pluralistic competition over central power positions is the distinguishing difference between democracy and authoritarianism” (Merkel, 2004). In democracies, winning an election is the only legal way to get into top executive positions. At the same time, electoral loss means that your given time to rule is over and that power needs to be transferred in a peaceful way to the candidate/party that has won the election.

Besides elections, political rights are essential for a democracy since the right to political participation is a prerequisite for free, fair, and competitive elections. The right to both political communication and political organization are vital parts of a full-fledged democracy. Political communication includes the right to freedom of speech and opinion. An important indicator for the implementation of freedom of speech is media freedom. Journalists and social media users are allowed to criticize government actions and voice alternative views.

Free Political organization means that “no political party following the procedures of a democratic constitution can be denied the right to political organization” (Merkel, 2004). Citizens should be able to freely form interest groups and political parties and act freely within those parties/groups, independent of state interference.

Another important element of an ideal democracy is the guaranteeing of civil rights by the state. Civil rights refer to constitutionally guaranteed rights that protect the individual against the state and its executive organs, such as the military and police. Civil rights are closely related to human rights, which in an ideal democracy should be applied to all citizen beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from discrimination as well as freedom from slavery and torture. Thus, ethnic, religious, and other minorities must be protected by the state/courts from discrimination and persecution from state and private actors.

The fourth democratic principle, which we will apply in this study, is that of horizontal accountability, which refers to checks and balances between state institutions. According to Latin American scholar Guillermo O’Donnell, horizontal accountability is about limiting executive power by a network of relatively autonomous state institutions. It can be pinned down to constitutionally defined, lawful action (O’Donnell, 1998).

The most important state institutions for the monitoring of the executive branch of government include the national parliament and the highest institution of the judiciary, for example, the Supreme Court. In addition, other state institutions such as independent electoral commissions, auditing agencies, anti-corruption bodies, and ombudspersons also contribute to horizontal accountability (Ziegenhain, 2015). If a head of government is weakening the supervisory functions or the independence of
other state institutions, then the system of checks and balances is damaged. This issue, in turn, leads to weaker horizontal accountability and, in general, to a weakening of democracy.

Result and Explanation

a) Vertical Accountability

The first elections after the military coup took place in May 2014, and coup leader Al-Sisi was elected as the new President of Egypt with 96.9 percent of the votes. This extremely high election result caused many observers to rate the elections as unfair (Roll, 2015). Besides Al-Sisi, only one other candidate, Hamdeen Sabahi, was allowed to run in the 2014 presidential elections. The military leadership asked all other candidates to reconsider their electoral ambitions and withdrew. Another criticism was that state resources and the state media were used to support Al-Sisi’s candidacy. In addition, other reports write about voter coercion and vote buying (Freedom House, 2022).

During the 2018 presidential election, many of the opposing candidates faced many challenges in running against President Al-Sisi. The leading and potential challenger to President Al-Sisi was Mousa Mostafa Mousa, who was able to obtain 20 nominations from members of the Egyptian parliament after pro-government members appealed (Saafan et al., 2023). Other candidates, during the 2018 election, have also faced various challenges, such as arrests, undeclared house arrests, and withdrawal or removal from the candidate race (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Just a few months ago, another presidential election took place from December 10, 2023, until January 10, 2024. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi secured his third term in office with 89.6% votes, with no serious challengers against him. The 2023 election was also widely criticized, and allegations of violations, repression, and lack of meaningful competition were raised. Opposing candidates and parties reported that individuals seeking to support candidates against President Al-Sisi were blocked, and all individuals who tried to protest against Egypt’s electoral system were sanctioned (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Egyptian political scientist Dr. Amr Adly stressed the lack of competitiveness in the national elections. He stated that during Mubarak’s time, elections were rigged, but nowadays, this is not necessary anymore because no genuine opposition party or candidate is allowed to run in the elections. Hence, the Egyptians already know who the winner will be. Therefore, for most people, elections are not important, and consequently, the voter turnout is extremely low (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly 2024).

Indeed, the voter turnout in the 2014 presidential elections was only 47.5 percent, and 41.0 percent in the 2018 elections. In the last presidential elections of 2023, however, it was significantly higher, with 66.7 percent. Political science professor Nevine Mosaad from Cairo University was quoted as saying that this increase can be attributed to Egyptians' heightened awareness of threats to national security, like the violent events in the neighboring Gaza Strip (Ahram Online, 2023).

b) Political Rights

Article 5 of the current Egyptian Constitution from 2014 states that “the political system is based on political and partisan multiplicity, the peaceful transfer of power, the separation and balance of powers, authority going with responsibility, and respect for human rights and freedoms” (Constitute Project, 2014). The reality, however, is very different since political rights in Egypt are severely constrained under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

The 2022 Human Rights Report made by the U.S. Department of State stated explicitly that the government of Egypt has made limitations on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression (U.S. Department of State, 2022). These changes and limitations impact the citizens' ability to form and engage in political parties and interest groups. In the report, Freedom House was rated with a "Political Rights" score of 6 out of 40 (Freedom House, 2022).

Civil society organizations, which are very important to stabilizing democracy in other Arab countries such as Tunisia (Sahide et al., 2022), cannot play a role in Egyptian politics anymore.
because they suffer from unprecedented repression, which is worse than the authoritarian Nasser period between 1954-1970. Thousands of politically active Egyptians were forced to go into exile since they were threatened with being arrested for their political activities (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly, 2024).

One of the notable aspects of the restrictions on political rights is the ban on religious and political parties in the post-coup constitution of 2014. The regulation officially aims to maintain the separation between religion and politics, with the intention of preventing the exploitation of religion for any political purposes. According to the Egyptian government, mixing religion with politics could lead to sectarianism and discrimination against minority religious groups. Therefore, religion has, according to the current Egyptian constitution, remained in the private sphere (Constitute Project, 2014).

Another interpretation, however, is that the Egyptian government led by General Al-Sisi is using this interpretation to get rid of its most important political opponent. The Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928 and has millions of members, is by far the biggest opposition group. After the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from office in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood came to power and won the majority of the seats in Egypt’s lower house parliament in the parliamentary elections that took place in November 2011 and January 2012. In a series of presidential elections in May and June 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood’s leading figure, Mohamed Morsi, was democratically elected as the new president.

After the military coup, the party was banned in Egypt and declared a terrorist organization. Thousands of its members were executed and imprisoned (Ali, 2020). In June 2019, Mohamed Morsi passed away in an Egyptian prison.

The restrictions on political rights did not only affect the Muslim Brotherhood but many other Islamic civil society organizations were crushed and heavily repressed. Many of these organizations enjoy high popularity since they provide social services, such as hospitals and schools (Laub, 2014).

Media freedom in Egypt is highly restricted under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, including the shutting down and restricting of independent news channels and the extreme censorship of online content where they discriminate against the government and the state. According to the World Press Freedom Index 2023 by Reporters Without Borders, Egypt is ranked 166 out of 180 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). It means one of the most restricted countries in the world, even below very authoritarian countries like Venezuela (position 159) or Russia (position 164) and only slightly before countries like China (position 179) and North Korea (position 189).

The government of Egypt has taken control of all the media under direct state control or the control of pro-government businesses. Some independent and non-state media journalists and media platforms still can operate, and some international organizations in Egypt have encouraged media freedom. However, the freedom of journalists doing their jobs in Egypt is extremely dire because the state continues to put them in prison for speaking on topics about the state and the leaders. Thousands of political activists, journalists, and artists have been sent to prison for expressing their views and opinions against President Al-Sisi and his ways of ruling the state on social media and peaceful protests. Amnesty International even compared Egypt with an open-air prison for critics (Amnesty International, 2018). The government has also blocked access to websites and social media accounts critical of them (AlAshry, 2022).

Laws have also been introduced to regulate online expression, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of individuals for their social media posts and online activities.

Furthermore, the government has utilized emergency laws and national security justifications to suppress dissent and limit freedom of speech. Journalists and bloggers face intimidation, harassment, and legal action for their reporting, with some facing arbitrary detention and unfair trials. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing press freedom, the reality on the ground reflects a shrinking space for independent journalism and a climate of fear among media professionals (Hamdy, 2017).
c) Civil Liberties

There have been numerous reports of abuses by the Egyptian government, including torture, killings, forced disappearances, and arbitrary detention. In addition, there have been widespread restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and association, with journalists, activists, and opposition politicians facing harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment for expressing dissenting views. In the 2022 report of Freedom House, Egypt has a "Civil Liberties" score of 12 out of 60 (Freedom House, 2022).

Although the women of Egypt were given the right to vote and the opportunity for equality and equal rights in the Constitution of Egypt in 1956, which states that gender-based discrimination and harassment are prohibited, the country is still struggling with acts of violence against women. One of the main forms of violence against women in Egypt is sexual harassment and sexual assault. In a survey of women made by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, the results of the survey showed that the majority of both foreign women and Egyptian women stated that they had faced harassment by the majority of Egyptian men and the government, including the military men and the police. In Egypt, even before Al-Sisi came to power, two-thirds of men had stated and admitted to harassing women (Joseph, 2011). In 2021, several women reported their sexual abuse incidents, that they were sexually harassed and assaulted at the hospitals, police stations by police officers or correctional officers, and at the hospital by staff, including doctors, during physical examination. After more complaints, President Al-Sisi modified the law on cases of sexual harassment in order to make the prison sentences harsher for perpetrators (El Naggar et al. 2021). In August 2021, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ratified law amendments to tighten the imprisonment term and the fine imposed for sexual harassment of men against women in Egypt. However, even after the ratification, a lot of sexual assault cases at the court are being dismissed (Egypt Today, 2021).

Ethnic-religious minority groups in Egypt are the Nubian community and the Coptic Christians (Eastern Orthodox Tradition). The Egyptian government under Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi has been criticized for its treatment of minority groups, including Coptic Christians and the Nubian community. While the government has taken some measures to address discrimination and protect minority rights, such as passing a law criminalizing discrimination, there are still reports of ongoing discrimination and violence against minority groups. These minority groups are facing discrimination and persecution. There have been reports of violence against Coptic Christians, including attacks on churches and individuals, as well as discrimination in employment and education (Viney, 2017). The Nubian community has also faced opposition in terms of land rights and cultural preservation (Mourad, 2015). There have been reports of discrimination against Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt, both by the state and the government, as well as by society at large. While the Egyptian government officially recognizes the Coptic Orthodox Church as a legitimate religious institution and guarantees freedom of religion, there have been incidents where Coptic Christians have faced discrimination and persecution (OHCHR, 2020). The Coptic Orthodox Christians have reported difficulty in obtaining permits to build or repair churches, and there have been instances where churches have been attacked or burned down by extremists. Coptic Christians have also reported discrimination in employment, education, and other areas of public life (OHCHR, 2020).

d) Horizontal Accountability

Under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, there have been multiple concerns about the erosion of horizontal accountability due to the concentration of power in the executive branch and the weakening of the other government branches and institutions, such as the national parliament and the judiciary (Masoud, 2014).

In the current political system, power is centralized in the president, who has far-reaching decision-making power. At the same time, the ability of other branches of government, such as the judiciary and the legislatures, has been weakened (Aziz, 2016). The national parliament, for example, is an institution that is very subservient to the current
President. Its members are mostly former Mubarak regime figures, allies of the President, and business elites with strong economic ties to the authoritarian regime (Al-Arian 2016). An example of the strong support of the parliament to the President was the approval of constitutional amendments that allowed President Al-Sisi to be in power until 2030 (Michaelson, 2019).

According to Egyptian political scientist Amr Adly, the current parliament is the weakest in Egyptian modern history (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly 2024). He explained that the Egyptian parliament is nowadays a state institution that plays a role that is not in accordance with classical democratic functions (representation and oversight) but rather as a recruitment organization of middlemen for government resources. According to him, there are dozens of parties, but they all represent state security organizations such as the police and the Secret Service (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly 2024). Thus, the Egyptian parliament cannot serve as a counterbalance to the president (Hassanein, 2021).

It also holds for the judiciary in Egypt, which refers to formally independent branches of the Egyptian government, including secular and religious courts. They are responsible for interpreting and implementing the law and ensuring its application's uniformity and consistency. Before Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi became the president of Egypt, the judiciary in Egypt was known for its fierce independence, with the judges being individually independent and responding negatively to outside attempts to influence their rulings (Aziz, 2017).

Under the rule of President Al-Sisi, there have been major changes in the state and the independence of the judiciary in Egypt. The government is suppressing the independence of the judicial institutions and eroding their capacity to hold the government accountable (Ibid.).

Law 13 of 2017 grants the president of Egypt the sole power of the state to appoint the chiefs of the top courts for all the three branches of the judiciary, whereas previously, that was chosen and held by just the court themselves (Auf, 2018). So far, President Al-Sisi can put his followers at the top of the judiciary. By appointing yes-men to these positions, he can make sure that the judiciary will not challenge the presidential powers, actions, and decisions.

Other parts of the judiciary, however, have some autonomy, particularly when they are not directly under the President. This condition particularly refers to the Administrative Court, which made several decisions against the government. The president amended a law to get more appointment powers over the Administrative Court (choose one out of three proposals). However, the judges there are career law experts who do not always follow the president. According to Amr Adly, the Constitutional Court, in contrast, is very politicized, and the leaders are all hired by the President (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly 2024).

Conclusion

In this paper, we were looking at how the current system of government in Egypt can be assessed. We analyzed whether there are still some democratic elements or whether it is an authoritarian system. By looking into four essential democracy criteria (free and fair election, political rights, civil liberty, and horizontal accountability), our finding is clear. Egypt has nearly no democratic features and is a classical authoritarian system.

The current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, came to power in a military coup in 2013 and has since consolidated power through crackdowns on political opposition, media censorship, and restrictions on civil society. The main factors contributing to classifying Egypt as an authoritarian regime over the society and the state are restricted freedom of speech and dissent, a history of suppressing free speech, and targeting journalists, bloggers, and social media users who express critical views. These factors have created a climate of fear and self-censorship that has further weakened democratic institutions in Egypt. The political system in Egypt is also characterized by a lack of checks and balances (horizontal accountability). The president has wide-ranging powers, including the ability to dissolve parliament and appoint judges, which is why the
judicial system has no independent power on its own.

The authoritarian political order looks very stable, and thus, the chances for democratization are low. At least some procedural forms of democracy (election, parliament, some civil society organizations) can be found in Egypt, but the country is far away from a full-fledged democracy. Egyptian political scientist Amr Adly expects Egypt “to remain an electoral autocracy” (Interview with Dr. Amr Adly 2024) in the near future. The authors of this paper share this opinion and expect no major political changes in the near future.

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