

Threats of boycott, fears of low voter turnout engulf Egypt election

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Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's defiant warning against disrupting Egypt's security and stability is being seen as a direct response to calls for a boycott of the country's upcoming election and fears of low voter turnout.

Speaking at ceremonies inaugurating Egypt's offshore Zohr gas field, Sisi said: "There will be other measures against anyone who believes he can mess with [Egypt's] security... I fear no one but God."

"Whoever wants to mess with Egypt's security and wreck it must get rid of me first because by God Almighty I will not allow it," he added.

Sisi threatened to seek "another mandate" directly from the Egyptian people. Analysts said that could lead to millions of Sisi's supporters taking to the streets to blunt criticisms of the election process.

"There is extreme worry among opposition figures who think the noose is being tightened around them," said Khaled Dawoud, the head of the opposition Al-Doustour Party. "We think the worst can happen in the coming few days."

Al-Doustour is part of the Civil Democratic Movement (CDM), a coalition of liberal and left-wing parties that has explicitly called for a boycott of the election. The Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Socialist Popular Alliance Party and the Nasserist Karama Current, other members of the CDM, have backed the boycott.

The "Stay at Home" campaign requested that voters remain at home during the March 26-28 vote and participate in a nationwide strike.

The CDM described Sisi's comments as an attempt "to spread fear among Egyptian voters... [and] undermine the integrity of the electoral competition."

"Clearing the political space of candidates in the name of preserving security is unconstitutional and does not promote security," the CDM statement added.

Many well-known political figures have backed the campaign, including former presidential hopefuls Khalid Ali, a human rights lawyer, and former MP Mohamed Anwar Sadat.

Only one candidate will be running against Sisi. Moussa Mostafa Moussa, the chairman of the centrist El-Ghad Party, was a Sisi supporter before deciding to run for president.

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The call for boycotting the vote came a day after the deadline passed for submitting applications to file as a candidate in the presidential election.

Many criticised the boycott campaign, particularly considering the involvement of Ali and Sadat, who withdrew from the election after saying it was difficult to meet the requirements to register. Presi-

dential candidates must file the endorsements of at least 20 MPs or 25,000 citizens from at least 15 governorates, with at least 1,000 endorsements from each governorate.

"Some political forces, both inside and outside Egypt, want to destroy this country," said Tarek Fahmi, a political science professor at Cairo University, who is a member of Sisi's presidential campaign team. "This is why the president says he would seek public approval to take measures to prevent this," Fahmi said.

In July 2013, Sisi, then minister of defence, asked for a "popular mandate" to take measures against what he described as "potential terrorism." Millions of Egyptians took to the streets, resulting in the ouster of Islamist President Muhammad Morsi. Sisi's comments that he could seek "another mandate" were viewed as a reference to those events.

"We have hopes that the measures the president talks about do not take us to yet a higher level of repression," Dawoud said.

A CDM statement declared: "We affirm that states are not run by mandates and the mobilisation of supporters in orchestrated gatherings but rather by constitutions and respect for freedoms."

Sisi explicitly called for high voter turnout in the election to counter appearances of voter apathy.

The CDM's boycott call, which could result in historic low voter turnout in a post-January 25 revolution election, has urged some members of parliament to act.

MP Mohamed Abdel Azeem said the boycott calls could cause international embarrassment for Egypt.



Troubled waters. Khaled Dawoud, the head of Al-Doustour Party, speaks during a news conference on the Egyptian opposition in Cairo, on January 30.

(AFP)

"This is why some action must be taken to prevent this boycott from happening," he said. "This action can be a legislative one."

Before the 2014 presidential vote, judges overseeing the electoral process threatened to fine voters who failed to show up at polling stations. Still, voter turnout was just 47.5% of Egypt's 54 million registered voters, the Supreme Election Committee said.

This year, 58 million voters have the right to vote in the presidential election but, with Sisi's re-election almost guaranteed, there is a sense that voter turnout could be lower.

This is why people have started to act, including pro-Sisi lawyers

who have lodged legal complaints against opposition figures.

A complaint was filed in the northern coastal city of Alexandria accusing the opposition of inciting the public against the Egyptian state, spreading frustration among the public and scaring investors away.

"I expect the prosecution to summon us for interrogation on the charges levelled against us in these complaints," Dawoud said. "We are not manipulating the public but we think the election will be a mere show."

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Viewpoint

For most Egyptians, security and economic growth issues trump other considerations



Hany Ghoraba

is an Egyptian political and counterterrorism analyst and author of "Egypt's Arab Spring and the Long and Winding Road to Democracy."

The age-old argument of democracy versus stability seems settled for most Egyptians in favour of stability ahead of the country's presidential election in March. It is likely to yield the same result as in 2014 – a landslide victory for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Few Egyptians admit to as much enthusiasm about the March election as in 2012 or even in 2014 when Sisi was first elected. For most, however, security and steady economic growth trump other considerations, not least freedom of speech.

This pragmatism is the product of the events of 2011 and 2013. A national uprising, begun in January 2011 by idealistic young Egyptians, was hijacked by Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood managed the country's takeover in record time. Fortunately, its way of thinking could not be hidden once it took charge of the country.

This triggered the June 30, 2013, revolt against Muslim Brotherhood rule. It was perhaps the first time in modern history that an Islamist regime was ousted by means of massive organised protests.

Both uprisings took their toll on Egypt. Businesses, tourism, the stock market and other sectors suffered losses conservatively estimated by Egyptian economists of at least \$100 billion.

These losses were huge for a country struggling before June



Expecting a win. A supporter of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi holds a poster with his image in front of the National Election Authority in Cairo, on January 29.

(Reuters)

2013 to push a development agenda. Egypt's international debt is double that of 2011 and the debt looks likely to rise because of the \$25 billion nuclear power deal with Russia.

The Egyptian currency is at one-third of its 2011 value. Prices are nearly four times what they were but salaries are at the same level. Egyptians labour under the twin burdens of record inflation rates and lack of opportunities.

The inflation rate, which soared to more than 35% in July 2017, dropped to 22.3% by year-end but

that's still extremely high. Egyptian news portal Masrawy reported that the government is expected to raise the price of electricity, gas and fuel this year with knock-on effects on foodstuffs and other commodities.

Higher utility prices are the result of the deal struck between the Egyptian government and the International Monetary Fund as part of its economic reform plan. Egyptians, however, are feeling the effects of inflation. Subsidies on bread and other basics go only so far.

Unsurprisingly, the fear is that political change could lead to higher inflation rates and fewer certainties. Sisi wins on those counts, if no other.

That said, all is not doom and gloom in Sisi's Egypt. The president has adopted effective energy policies and Egypt is moving towards energy self-sufficiency. The government has promised two expensive ventures – a new administrative capital and Suez Canal development. Also, the tourism sector is gradually improving, ending 2017 with a 54% jump over 2016 to 8.3 million tourists visiting the Egypt, a government official told Reuters.

If Sisi is the safest bet for 2018, what of 2022, when his second term as president would end?

It may seem a rather long way off but the response to projections for 2022 is telling. Egyptians seem to believe a lot less in more change leading to better things. They seem largely inclined to repose faith in the military rather than in politicians.

Unless the situation changes drastically in the next four years, Egyptians are likely to favour a leader with a military background so long as he promises the same levels of security and stability they've come to expect.

Clearly, in a decade of uprisings and change, Egyptians have come to fear more change. The next great revolution for Egypt would be for the freedom from fear.

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