

Egypt's presidential campaign starts, Sisi's challenger faces uphill battle

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Cairo

Campaigning in Egypt's presidential race has officially kicked off but few expect a heated contest with just two candidates, including Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is expected to easily win reelection, competing.

Banners and photos of the candidates, Sisi and Moussa Mostafa Moussa, chairman of the centrist al-Ghad (Tomorrow) Party, appeared overnight, with pro-Sisi posters easily outnumbering those of his last-minute challenger.

Sisi's re-election campaign announced it would have a series of public rallies and conferences in several provinces to present a record of the president's first term in office.

There is little visible excitement among Egyptians ahead of the vote, with few expecting an upset.

"The president worked on solving most of the problems facing Egyptians during his first term at one and the same time," Karim Mahmud, a former diplomat and coordinator of Sisi's campaign, said. "We will work in the coming days to make achievements in this regard clear to everybody."

When Sisi took office in June 2014, Egypt was facing many major challenges, including a weak economy and deteriorating relations with once staunch allies. The former army chief of staff has stabilised the economy and initiated several large national projects.

"I think these are all facts ordinary people can see," Mahmud said. "This makes for a promising prospect for our candidate in the election."

Campaigning will continue until March 23 and voting begins

March 26. There is little visible excitement among Egyptians ahead of the vote, with few expecting an upset.

However, staff members at Moussa's campaign centre in Cairo's Talaat Harb Square, said they are optimistic. The Moussa campaign is a swirl of activity organising ten public rallies in different provinces to get the word out about Moussa.

Adel Esmat, spokesman of the Moussa campaign, said the aim is to engage directly with the Egyptian electorate.

"We will make direct contact with voters to present our candidate's platform," Esmat said. "Our candidate has a strong record as party chief and we want to make this record clear to everybody."

One of the problems facing Moussa is that few Egyptians know his name, let alone recognise his face. Al-Ghad has no members in parliament and has been largely sidelined in recent years.

Moussa became party leader in 2005, winning a leadership contest over former presidential candidate Ayman Nour, a liberal opposition figure in voluntary exile in Turkey.

Moussa, a civil engineer and a supporter of Sisi before declaring his election bid, is depending on backing from relatives, party members and the Federation of Arab Tribes, a union headed by Moussa that includes tens of thousands of tribesmen across the country.

Sisi is a popular figure in Egypt, despite international criticism over Cairo's heavy-handed crackdown on the opposition which has seen better-known opposition candidates back a boycott of the elections.

Those potential Sisi challengers included former Chief of Staff Sami Anan and former leading Muslim Brotherhood figure Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, who were detained before candidacies were formalised. Former MP Anwar Esmat Sadat and popular human rights lawyer Khalid Ali withdrew their presidential candidacies, citing alleged unfair conditions.

Security remains a major issue, with Egypt involved in a large military operation against the Islamic



A settled race? Posters of Egypt's presidential candidates Moussa Mostafa Moussa (L) and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi for the upcoming election in Cairo, on March 1. (Reuters)

State (ISIS) in the Sinai Peninsula and elsewhere in the country. ISIS threatened to retaliate by targeting polling stations and voters.

Sisi has not explicitly campaigned for re-election but his appearances on television and in public as president, inaugurating projects and opening facilities, served to bolster his image.

National television broadcast footage of Sisi's inauguration of a Sinai army command centre, east of the Suez Canal on February 25 showed

the president using the ceremonies to warn against terrorist groups trying to divide and destroy Egypt.

"The terrorists and their backers have been planning for this for a long time," Sisi, dressed in military fatigues, said. "We will not allow anybody to destabilise our country again."

Inside research centres and intellectual circles, analysts said Sisi, a former army chief of staff, is considered a bulwark against

Islamist terrorism.

"Almost everybody knows the result of the elections beforehand," said Ahmed Youssef, a political science professor at Cairo University. "Sisi has a record difficult to beat, not only for Moussa but for any other candidate, particularly now when most of the people want security and a functioning economy."

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

Egyptian Army requests more time to complete anti-ISIS offensive

Ahmed Megahid

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The Egyptian Army has asked for additional time to complete its offensive against the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sinai Peninsula amid fears the militant group could retaliate during the country's presidential elections.

"The mission of the troops is difficult by all means," said retired General Sameh Abu Hashima. "They are unearthing the sands and the stones inch by inch to end the terrorist presence altogether."

The request for additional time was made February 25 by army Chief of Staff Mohamed Farid Hegazy, who told Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi that it would not be easy for his troops to complete Operation Sinai 2018 on schedule.

Sisi in November gave the Egyptian armed forces until the end of February to completely eradicate ISIS from Sinai.

ISIS militants, Hegazy said, have maintained a presence in Sinai for years and have prepared against a full-scale military operation. ISIS's preparations include underground tunnels, hideouts and arms and explosives caches across the peninsula.

The rugged terrain in Sinai – mostly mountains and desert – makes it easy for ISIS fighters to hide and wait for military operations to pass. The group has also established ties with local tribes.

"This is why rooting them out will take time," Abu Hashima said.

Although Sisi set the 3-month time frame for completion of the offensive in late November, Operation Sinai 2018 did not begin until February 9. Observers said the first two months had likely involved gathering intelligence and logistical preparation.

The army said it has killed dozens of suspected militants and arrested hundreds of others. It destroyed dozens of vehicles and motorcycles and defused or detonated hundreds of improvised explosive devices.

Hegazy said 42,000 troops were part of the operation. They were using 800 military vehicles and 230 aircraft, making it the largest military operation in Sinai since the 1979 peace treaty with Israel that limited Egypt's military presence on the peninsula.

Another 18,000 troops, Hegazy said, were handling security operations in other parts of Egypt, especially near the western border with Libya and the southern border with Sudan, to address the presence of militants.

The Egyptian Navy was man-

dated to secure the coast near the North Sinai city of El Arish to prevent supplies from reaching militants from the sea.

Eradicating the ISIS militants will require more than just military power, analysts warned, particularly given their years-long pres-

ence on the Sinai Peninsula.

One of the challenges remains Cairo's ambiguous ties with the Sinai tribes, which have complained of decades of neglect. The Egyptian government needs to win over the tribes to limit their cooperation with militants.

"The role the Sinai tribes can play in this battle is very important and decisive," said Samir Ghattas, the head of the Middle East Forum for Strategic Studies, an Egyptian think-tank. "They have the information and know who the terrorists are."

Sinai tribes initially sought not to get involved in the battle, allowing ISIS to increase its presence on the peninsula. The tribes entered the fight last year when ISIS threatened their economic interests and killed and kidnapped tribal members. ISIS killed several tribesmen after accusing them of collaborating with the Egyptian Army.

Tribal militias are cooperating with the military. Sinai tribes post videos on social media that show operations against ISIS positions.

The Tarabin Bedouins, with as many as 40,000 members, make up one of the largest tribes in the area. They are working with the army as guides and militia. Other tribes remain neutral or could be assisting ISIS.

The requested time extension for finishing off ISIS Sinai will have in-

ternal political and security consequences, political analysts said.

They said Sisi's optimistic 3-month time frame was set to end the operations before the March 26-28 presidential election, which Sisi is expected to win easily.

"He would have used the success in eradicating ISIS as a campaigning tool," said Hassan Nafaa, a political science professor at Cairo University. "However, the delay in announcing the final defeat of ISIS will deprive him of this moment of victory."

There are fears that ISIS could threaten the presidential vote to embarrass the government. In a video released February 11, ISIS threatened to target polling stations, labelling elections as a form of polytheism.

"We hereby warn the Muslim public in Egypt and Sinai during these polytheistic days not to come near the polling stations and the courts and to avoid large gatherings, for they are a target for us," an ISIS fighter going by Abu Muhammad Al-Masri says on the video.

"There are enough reasons to worry about the prospect of attacks," Ghattas said. "This is a venomous group that will brook no delay in attacking, even innocent civilians if it has the chance to."

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

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Retired General Sameh Abu Hashima