POMED PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY

POPULAR POLITICS IN EGYPT: FROM THE 2011 REVOLUTION TO AL-SISI'S AUTHORITARIAN REVIVAL

What Do Political Scientists Say?

SCOTT WILLIAMSON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than a decade after protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square led to the ousting of Egypt's longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak, scholars continue to debate several key questions: What led Egyptians to pour into the streets in late January 2011 to demand Mubarak's resignation, and why was his regime unable to quash the uprising? Why did the attempt to create a post-Mubarak democracy fail, leading instead to a military coup in 2013 against Egypt's first freely elected, civilian government? And how did coup leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi succeed, within a year, in taking over the presidency, crushing democracy, and consolidating a new regime that is even more repressive than Mubarak's?

This report examines how a growing body of political science scholarship has tried to answer these questions about Egypt's pivotal 2011-2014 period, with a focus on everyday Egyptians' political participation, attitudes, and behaviors. It begins with a look at what political science scholarship has to say about the drivers of the January 25 revolution, then shifts to research on the failure of the democratic transition during the 2011-2013 political opening. Next, it turns to studies of how al-Sisi managed to reconstitute authoritarianism so quickly. The report concludes by drawing on political science research beyond Egypt to consider what might trigger a new revolution in the country and how a second transition might play out.

Protesters gather in Tahrir Square to demand an end to the Mubarak regime, February 9, 2011. Photo: Jonathan Rashad/Wikimedia Commons

I. INTRODUCTION

More than ten years after Egyptians rose up against their authoritarian president Hosni Mubarak, debate continues about why the January 25 revolution happened, why only 18 days of protests succeeded in ousting him, and why the subsequent democratic transition failed. After living under Mubarak's dictatorship for almost three decades, why did Egyptians take to the streets en masse in late January 2011 to demand his ouster, and why was his regime unable to quash the uprising? Why did the attempt to create a democracy post-Mubarak result instead in a military coup in 2013? And how did coup leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi manage to install himself as president by 2014 and consolidate a regime even more repressive than Mubarak's?

Contributing to the debate is a growing body of political science scholarship about Egypt's tumultuous trajectory during the pivotal period between 2011 and 2014. This report summarizes a selection of that scholarship with the goal of communicating its most important findings to a broader audience. It focuses primarily on studies about everyday Egyptians and their political attitudes and behaviors during this period, including their participation in protests and elections and their views of democracy. Many studies have explored the role of state institutions like the military and judiciary, political organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, or foreign powers such as the United States and other Arab countries, all of which were influential in determining the course of outcomes in Egypt during this period. But the revolution and its aftermath precipitated an explosive opening of mass politics that is deserving of attention in its own right, because the actions and beliefs of the Egyptian people mattered a great deal for the country's trajectory.

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With this focus in mind, this report first looks at what political science scholarship has to say about the drivers of the January 25 revolution, then shifts to research on the failure of the democratic transition during the 2011-2013 political opening. Next, it turns to studies of how al-Sisi managed to reconstitute an authoritarian system after heading the July 2013 military coup against Egypt's first freely elected, civilian president, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. The report concludes by drawing on political science research beyond Egypt to consider what might trigger a new revolution in the country and how a second transition might play out.

II. THE 2011 REVOLUTION

Small, sporadic anti-government protests had become more frequent during the last decade of Mubarak's rule. But the size and persistence of the popular mobilization that began on January 25 and that forced Mubarak to step down on February 11, 2011, were on an entirely different scale. Without this level of mobilization, it is unlikely that senior military officers would have responded to the protesters' demands and removed Mubarak from power. What motivated Egyptians to join these mass demonstrations?

On the one hand, individuals' ideologies influenced their likelihood of participating. Research by Thyen and Gerschewski (2018) and Hoffman and Jamal (2014) points to the role of nationalist and religious beliefs in motivating Egyptians to take to the streets in large numbers in January 2011. Thyen and Gerschewski demonstrate that Egyptians with stronger nationalist views regarding the role of foreign countries in Egypt were more likely to participate in the protests, a result they link to anger at Mubarak's failure to uphold nationalist principles. Hoffman and Jamal, meanwhile, find that more frequent Quran readers were substantially more likely to have protested, which they argue was the product of these Egyptians' stronger concerns about inequities under Mubarak's regime and higher rate of support for democracy. Beissinger, Jamal, and Mazur (2015) also note that many Egyptians cited demands for civil and political freedoms, or opposition to the prospect that the aging Mubarak would pass the presidency to his son Gamal, as their primary reasons for joining the uprising.

On the other hand, some scholarship finds that economic grievances may have mattered more for driving protest participation. While the data used by Beissinger, Jamal, and Mazur indicate that grievances against Mubarak's authoritarianism had some salience, they find that more protesters were motivated by concerns over the economy and corruption. Their data also indicate that protesters disproportionately belonged to the urban middle class, which the authors interpret as evidence that opposition to Mubarak's economic reform policies—which hit the urban middle class particularly hard—was a key driver of the demonstrations. Campante and Chor (2012) argue that a growing mismatch between rising educational attainment and stagnant employment opportunities in Arab countries, and especially in Egypt, in the decade leading up to the 2011 Arab Spring motivated educated but underemployed individuals to join the protests. These analyses align with other research showing the importance of economic factors in spurring protests in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East in the period before the Arab Spring (Massoud, Doces, and Magee 2019).

If Egypt's economic woes ripened the country for revolt, social networks were crucial in bringing Egyptians to the streets starting on January 25, according to several political scientists. Beissinger, Jamal, and Mazur (2015) show that the vast majority of protesters knew others who were demonstrating, which may suggest they were were motivated to join in part by their personal connections. Nugent and Berman (2018) find that Egyptians who were active in community, religious, or labor networks—and particularly those involved in more than one—were significantly more likely to have gone into the streets during the 18 days. This finding aligns with research by Clarke (2014), who documents how activists with ties to multiple opposition-oriented networks—namely the independent labor movement, movements involving Cairo-based secular youth activists and political parties, and the Muslim Brotherhood—were central in bridging divisions among these networks, which in turn enabled successful large-scale mobilization.

What about the role of the Internet? While initial descriptions of social media as a transformative, driving force in the revolution were overstated, scholars have found that the Internet did contribute to Egyptians' mobilization in key ways (Khamis and Vaughn 2012). Engagement with social media seems to have facilitated mobilization by "offline" social networks by providing their members with an effective means of com-

Egyptians gather around an army tank in the streets of Cairo, January 29, 2011. Photo: Alisdare Hickson/Flickr

munication. In line with this idea, Nugent and Berman (2018) show that Egyptians who were active on Facebook were more likely to have participated in the protests, but especially so if they already belonged to community networks such as "charities, sports and cultural clubs, and volunteer groups." In addition, social media appears to have been a particularly important tool for the "vanguard" activists who organized the protests in the opening days of the revolution. Research by Tufekci and Wilson (2012) and Hamanaka (2020) indicates that social media users were much more likely to have participated in protests in the critical first days. Likewise, Clarke and Kocak (2020) find that Facebook aided activists in planning and recruitment leading up to January 25 while Twitter was key for disseminating live updates on that day, helping protesters to coordinate against the security forces.

Once they were in the streets, how did the protesters succeed in bringing an unexpectedly swift end to the Mubarak regime? With the iconic images of huge, peaceful demonstrations in Tahrir Square, the idea that nonviolent tactics were key to ousting Mubarak has become conventional wisdom, but some scholars argue that the real story is more complicated. Most notably, Ketchley (2017) describes how Egyptians attacked and burned dozens of police stations between January 26 and 28 in retaliation for police killings of protesters at the start of the revolution, arguing that this anti-police violence was in fact crucial in forcing out Mubarak. Ketchley maintains that the attacks broke the power of Mubarak's long-feared interior ministry and eroded the regime's repressive capacity. This development drove more protesters into the streets once they saw the police defeated and forced Mubarak to rely on the army to try to control the demonstrations. Ultimately, army officers proved unwilling to repress the protests—perhaps because they were unsure of the loyalty of their conscript soldiers (Ketchley 2017)—and they instead turned against the president. In other words, Ketchley's research suggests that without the willingness of some protesters to use anti-police violence early on in the 18 days, it is plausible that the Mubarak regime would have crushed the demonstrations.

III. DEMOCRACY'S FAILURE

Following Mubarak's resignation on February 11, 2011, the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power, promising to rule Egypt temporarily until a democratically elected leadership was in place. Under the SCAF, controls on political and media activity were loosened, pluralism flourished, and Egypt held its first free parliamentary elections in late 2011, won by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties, and its first free presidential vote in June 2012, won by the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi. On June 30, 2012, as it had pledged to do, the SCAF formally transferred power to Morsi and his new civilian government. Yet despite these seemingly democratic turning points, the country continued to experience significant political turbulence as Egyptians struggled to create new governing institutions and became increasingly polarized between pro- and anti-Islamist forces. Following very large anti-Brotherhood protests on June 30, 2013 (supported if not orchestrated by the army and security forces), then-defense minister al-Sisi removed Morsi through a military coup on July 3. Assuming power behind the façade of a new army-backed civilian government, al-Sisi quickly reasserted the military's political dominance and launched a massive and bloody crackdown against the Brotherhood. In the following months, he expanded the crackdown to repress harshly January 25 revolutionaries and secular opponents of the coup, while rolling back rights and freedoms for the entire population. Al-Sisi's violent authoritarian moves put an end to the nascent democratic transition—all with the apparent backing of many Egyptians who just three years earlier had celebrated Mubarak's ouster and supported the democratic transition. Why did the attempted transition to democracy collapse so quickly—and with at least some popular support?

Some political scientists suggest that Egyptians' weakening commitment to civilian democratic governance contributed to the failure of the post-Mubarak experiment in democracy. Hassan, Kendall, and Whitefield (2018) find that the percentage of Egyptians strongly supporting the military's right to intervene in politics increased by more than 20 percentage points between 2011 and 2014. Likewise, Spierings (2020) documents a decline in Egyptians' support for democracy during this same period, with fewer Egyptians saying that democracy was good for their country and more saying that it was bad. Bou Nassif (2017) and Hatab (2018) suggest that the 2013 coup was made possible by growing public disgruntlement with the weak performance of nascent democratic institutions and by many Egyptians' increased willingness to accept the military's intervention in the political process. This finding aligns with a broader political science literature showing that coups are more likely to be attempted and to succeed when there are clear signs of significant opposition to the government (e.g., Johnson and Thyne 2018; Casper and Tyson 2014). Why did these attitudes among the Egyptian public develop as they did?

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The chronic instability that followed Mubarak's ouster was one factor, as protests and political turmoil continued long after he stepped down, insecurity and crime rose, and the economy fell into crisis. As has been documented, some of these challenges were exacerbated by deliberate actions taken by the security agencies and by other regime actors opposed to democratic change (e.g., Ketchley 2017), but the incompetence of the Morsi administration and the sheer

Women queue to vote in Cairo during round one of Egypt's first presidential election, May 23, 2012. Photo: Fatma El Zahraa Yassin/ UN Women

scale of the economic and political difficulties facing the country also played a role. Regardless of the cause, negative political and economic developments between 2011 and 2013 undermined Egyptians' commitment to their nascent democracy.

Ketchley and El-Rayyes (2021) provide evidence of this dynamic in their study of post-revolution protest activity and its effects on Egyptians' attitudes toward democracy. Combining survey data of the Egyptian public with an original dataset of protests held across Egypt in the first six months of 2011, they demonstrate that Egyptians living near the locations of sustained protests held after Mubarak's ouster showed less favorable attitudes toward democratic governance. The authors attribute this lower support for democracy to frustration with disrupted lives and livelihoods that occurred in areas that saw repeated demonstrations.

Several other studies present evidence that points in a similar direction. Mazaheri and Monroe (2018) show that small business owners hit by significant disruptions during the Arab Spring were less supportive of democracy, perhaps because they were more likely to have experienced the "destruction of their place of work or residence," "the theft or loss of personal belongings," or "the loss of job or a subsidy." Cammett, Diwan, and Vartanova (2020) and Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo (2020) find that Egyptians became less supportive of democracy between 2011 and 2013, which they connect to Egyptians' perceptions of declining economic conditions and worsening personal security in the aftermath of the revolution. Likewise, Abadeer et al. (2019) show that rising crime after Mubarak's ouster was associated with a greater willingness to support anti-democratic politicians and express anti-democratic attitudes at key moments during the transition.

Polarization between Islamist and non-Islamist political forces also eroded Egyptians' commitment to electoral democracy. Although Islamists and non-Islamists came together to join

the early 2011 protests, uniting around their shared demand for Mubarak's removal, they quickly diverged over what the post-Mubarak transition should look like, disagreeing on issues ranging from the timing of elections to the role of religion in the new constitution. Research by Nugent (2020) suggests that Egypt's Islamist and non-Islamist political forces were prone to polarization from the outset because of their different treatment by the Mubarak regime. Mubarak's security forces had harshly repressed the Brotherhood and other Islamist opposition groups while using a relatively less harsh approach with the non-Islamist opposition. This divergent experience left opposition forces insulated from and distrustful of each other, which likely undermined their ability to cooperate during the transition.

Another factor contributing to polarization was Islamists' domination of the 2011 and 2012 elections, in which their candidates outperformed the fragmented non-Islamist competition. Political science research suggests that Islamists' electoral support, and especially the strong performance of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, was driven less by religious ideology than by the Brotherhood's mobilizational advantages (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015), as well as by the group's reputation for competence (Brooke 2019) and supporting redistributive economic policies (Masoud 2014). Nonetheless, polarization quickly became a defining feature of Egypt's transition politics, likely because Islamists' dominant electoral victories incentivized them to eschew compromises with secular forces while motivating the non-Islamists to look for non-electoral means to advance their interests (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Wickham 2015).

Consistent with the argument that polarization weakened support for democracy, Grewal and Monroe (2018) show that Egyptians opposed to political Islam began to see democracy as less suitable for their country after the Brotherhood performed so well in free elections. This declining support for democracy was particularly pronounced in governorates such as Cairo where non-Islamist voters were most concentrated and

Anti-Morsi protesters demonstrate in Egypt on June, 28 2013. Photo: Lilian Wagdy/Flickr

had expected their candidates to do well. Studies using turnout data from the 2012 presidential election (Abadeer, Blackman, and Williamson 2018) and survey data of Egyptians' political attitudes (Hassan, Kendall, and Whitefield 2018) also suggest that commitment to democratic institutions declined among groups that were traditionally more supportive of democracy, such as more highly educated Egyptians living in urban areas. Hassan, Kendall, and Whitefield (2018) find that support for democracy among Islamists weakened after the 2013 coup as well. These results suggest that as polarization set in and as Egyptians felt that democracy was not working well for their side, they became less invested in competitive elections and more likely to accept a return to authoritarian governance (as long as their side was in power).

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In fact, polarization also appears to have shaped Egyptians' evaluation of whether they were living under a democracy at all in the period between Mubarak's ouster and the 2013 coup. Robbins (2015) documents that more Egyptians believed their country to be democratic in June 2011 than in April 2013, despite the latter date occurring after Egypt had held free parliamentary and presidential elections. He attributes this pattern to the intense hostility toward the Morsi government that developed among many Egyptians, in part because of perceptions that the Brotherhood was attempting to use elections as a stepping stone to establish a new authoritarian regime. These evaluations of democracy under Morsi's presidency have implications for the coup's success, because they suggest that some Egyptians genuinely supported military intervention as a means of removing what they perceived as an authoritarian government. Egyptians also experienced significant declines of trust in their fellow citizens and in political institutions during the Morsi presidency (Cammett, Diwan, and Vartanova 2020; Spierings 2017), while polarized social media networks spread fear about the intentions of opposing political groups (Lynch, Freelon, and Aday 2017). This declining trust and heightened fear may have weakened Egyptians' willingness to defend democratic institutions such as a freely elected parliament and president when they were controlled by their political opponents.

Of course, instability and polarization are common in many democratic transitions, not all of which fail. Tunisia is an example of a country where these challenges are very present but whose post-dictatorship transition since 2011 has resulted in an ongoing democratization process, though it is now threatened by President Kaïs Saïed's recent power grab. Protests and other forms of disruptive activism can play an important role during transitions by pressuring the authorities to follow through on democratic reforms. Without Egypt's history of military involvement in politics, the country's nascent democracy may have muddled through, with Egyptians continuing to elect their leaders freely despite struggling with deeply rooted political and economic challenges.

In addition, it is important to note that large numbers of Egyptians continued to express support for democracy during the transition (Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020). This support began to decline in 2012, and Egyptians simultaneously became more willing to endorse practices like military intervention that are inconsistent with democratic governance, but many if not most Egyptians still expressed aspirations to live in a democracy. Nonetheless, the softening of support for democratic principles, including support for civilian governance and acceptance of elections won by opponents, alongside rising hostility toward elected President Morsi, made it easier for the military and other counterrevolutionary forces to reverse the democratic gains of the revolution.

IV. AL-SISI'S CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

In the days and weeks after the military coup, it was not obvious how subsequent political developments would unfold. After Morsi's removal, the brief period of flux, as well as statements by the military-backed government, led some Egyptians to believe that a democratic "reset," or at least a popular rejection of army rule, would occur. Morsi's supporters took to the streets in Cairo and other cities in large numbers after his removal and arrest, carrying on these counter-protests for months. Furthermore, the fact that the new military-backed government's repression was far more brutal than what had occurred under the Mubarak regime could have unleashed a public outcry against the new regime. Yet, within a year of the coup, organized opposition to the new political order had dissipated, and al-Sisi had formally ascended to the presidency through a manipulated May 2014 election. How did al-Sisi manage to consolidate a new authoritarian system—and his own power—in a relatively short time?

First, the military's willingness to use extreme violence soon after the coup—killing at least one thousand pro-Morsi demonstrators between July and October 2013 and arresting many thousands of others—raised the costs of opposition to such an extent that even al-Sisi's most intense opponents, mainly Brotherhood supporters, found it difficult to mobilize effectively. In response to this violence, anti-coup activists did what they could to change their tactics. For instance, Ketchley (2017) documents how anti-coup activists organized shorter, smaller protests in less central areas of Cairo and other cities so that they could disperse before coming under pressure (often in the form of live fire) from the security forces. These tactics enabled protests to persist for several months as the repression intensified, but they also meant that protests were smaller and less visible to the public—and therefore less effective (Ketchley 2017). For some Islamists, state-sponsored violence motivated them to become more involved politically; in particular, Islamist women mobilized more heavily in the pro-Morsi protest movement after the massacres at Cairo's Raba'a and Ennadha squares in August 2013 (ElMasry and Ketchley 2020). More generally, however, repression weakened the Brotherhood over the following years by creating divisions within its ranks, steering some members to violently confront the regime, others toward accommodating it, and still others toward political apathy (Al-Anani 2019; Brooke and Nugent 2020).

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The effects of repression in post-coup Egypt extended beyond the Brotherhood to quash political participation more generally (Sika 2018, 2019), as many activists became dejected and despondent because of the revolution's failure (Allam 2018). While some shifted their efforts to new and creative forms of community activism on issues such as women's rights, most stepped back from overt political participation given the severe risks under al-Sisi and their feelings of powerlessness (Allam 2018; Hafez 2016). Others who were exposed to state violence during the revolutionary period experienced health problems such as increased drug use (Blackman,

Protesters survey the scene after Egyptian security forces' massacre of hundreds of pro-Morsi civilians at Cairo's Rabaa Square, August 14, 2013. Photo: Mosa'ab Elshamy/Flickr

Kammourh, and Nugent 2021). According to Nugent and Brooke (2018), those living in voting districts won by Morsi and the Brotherhood in the 2011 and 2012 elections were more likely to remove themselves from post-coup politics, demonstrating less propensity to vote in elections under al-Sisi's presidency.

But it was not just the intensity of repression that mattered. The post-coup regime also appears to have been effective at justifying to key segments of the Egyptian public its violence and other repression. Building upon existing polarization between Islamists and non-Brotherhood supporters, al-Sisi and top officials in the regime, especially military figures, used their heavy influence over most media outlets to propagate the message that they were carrying out a necessary "second revolution," while the Brotherhood and others who opposed the coup were violent terrorists bent on destroying the Egyptian state (AlNajjar 2016; Darwich 2017; Edel and Josua 2018). Williamson and Malik (2020) rely on a survey experiment to show that propaganda attributing post-coup violence to the Brotherhood was capable of increasing public support for repression against the movement's supporters. When Egyptians were exposed to information from security agencies that was reported in the Egyptian media, which portrayed the victims of police killings as violent terrorists, they became more willing to accept the repression as justified. The study also shows that information from human rights organizations documenting police violence and disproving claims of violence by the Brotherhood was able to counter the effects of the regime's propaganda. However, al-Sisi's regime cracked down on independent media and on human rights advocacy that could shed light on the state's unjustified use of force.

Additionally, according to some research, al-Sisi himself appears to have enjoyed relatively high levels of popularity among Egyptians in the first few years after the coup. Truex and Tavana (2019) used a method designed to elicit views on politically sensitive topics to evaluate Egyptians' attitudes toward al-Sisi in October

Pro-government crowds gather in Cairo's Tahrir Square on the third anniversary of Egypt's uprising, January 25, 2014. Photo: Hamada Elrasam/VOA/Wikimedia Commons

2016. Their results suggest that al-Sisi was held in positive regard by 58 percent of Egyptians at the time, with 40 percent holding strongly positive attitudes toward the dictator and only 25 percent holding strongly negative attitudes. The authors also find that Egyptians who expressed support for secular democracy were more likely than other survey respondents to view al-Sisi favorably, which may have occurred because this group harbored strong, negative feelings toward the Muslim Brotherhood and what they perceived as the religious authoritarianism of Morsi's presidency. More broadly, al-Sisi's relative popularity may be partially explained by Egyptians' changing perceptions of their country's performance under his rule. By 2016, Egyptians were expressing much more optimism about their economic prospects and personal security than they had during the 2011 to 2013 period, and their trust in the government had rebounded significantly as well (Cammett, Diwan, and Vartanova 2020). This optimism may have faded in recent years as the country's economy continues to struggle, but initial popular support likely contributed to al-Sisi's ability to stabilize the new regime and severely weaken dissent.

In other words, violence was vital for al-Sisi's consolidation of power, but so was justification of that violence by his regime. Egyptians' changing perceptions of their economic fortunes and personal security, at least in the first few years of al-Sisi's rule, likely helped to solidify his hold on power as well.

V. CONCLUSION: WHAT COULD COME NEXT?

The style of authoritarian governance employed by al-Sisi resembles what some political scientists call "personalist" rule, in which the political system revolves around a dictator who monopolizes decision-making and relies on the support of a narrow group of elite supporters. Power in Egypt has been concentrated to a very high degree in the presidency. The parliament and political parties are weak, and the military, though possessing substantial influence as al-Sisi's primary support base, is increasingly subordinate to the president (Brooks 2021; Rutherford 2018; El Sherif 2017). This style of governance differs from other authoritarian regimes where power is shared more widely among political elites and state institutions. For instance, although Mubarak also held substantial power, his ruling National Democratic Party and its senior members exercised significant political influence under his presidency, and many state institutions and civil society groups operated with relatively more autonomy. Political science research into how authoritarian regimes fall apart suggests these differences may have implications for the nature of Egypt's next political transition.

Since the end of the Cold War, mass uprisings and civil wars, rather than elite defections and coups, have become increasingly common as the causes of authoritarian regime collapse (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). Compared to other types of authoritarian regimes, personalist dictatorships like al-Sisi's are more susceptible to mass uprisings or other pressures from below than to elite defections because the dictator's core supporters are unlikely to turn on him in the absence of significant popular opposition (Geddes 1999; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). If al-Sisi is eventually forced out of the presidency, such a development will probably occur through mass mobilization that, as happened in 2011, pushes senior military officers to abandon him in the face of mounting public opposition.

What would trigger such an uprising? Poor economic performance can lead to political instability in all types of political systems, but economic crises are especially dangerous for personalist dictators. Firstly, these crises can make it harder for the dictator to distribute the material benefits that keep his narrow base of supporters loyal (Geddes 1999). At the same time, because of their significant powers and dominance, personalist dictators can have more difficulty convincing the public that they are not to blame for these crises, increasing the likelihood that they are targeted by mass opposition (Williamson 2020). The repressive nature of these systems can make it particularly difficult to figure out when the public is upset and likely to mobilize (Wintrobe 1998), meaning that popular uprisings tend to erupt unexpectedly.

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Frustrations with deteriorating living standards and rising hardship among ordinary Egyptians have previously sparked protests against al-Sisi that caught the regime by surprise (such as in September 2019), and if his presidency ever does end unexpectedly, it may do so at a moment of severe economic disruption. If al-Sisi is undone by an economic crisis that triggers mass mobilization, his collapse has a high chance of turning even more violent than the 2011 revolution. Consistent with his regime's behavior so far, personalist regimes are more likely than other types of authoritarian regimes to engage in in-

tense and violent repression (Frantz et al. 2020), and they also tend to go down fighting in violent circumstances (Geddes 1999).

When personalist dictatorships are overthrown, they are also less likely than other authoritarian regimes to be replaced by democracies. This negative result likely occurs because of their tendency to be overthrown violently, which increases the likelihood of a messy and unstable transition (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018). This pattern suggests that Egypt has a high chance of returning to authoritarian governance even if al-Sisi is ousted.

To be sure, these findings paint a pessimistic picture of what a future transition away from al-Sisi's rule might look like. Nonetheless, it is possible for al-Sisi to be forced from power and for Egypt to then construct a more democratic political system. The repression of the current regime has been particularly harsh for Islamists, but it has also been broader, more indiscriminate, and more severe than Mubarak's, and therefore far more likely to sweep up non-Islamist political activists. This shared experience of exclusion and violence suffered by different opponents of the regime could help to reduce the polarization that occurred during the post-Mubarak transition and to facilitate a more united front against the military and other anti-democratic institutions and actors (Nugent 2021). In addition, activists learn from past experiences: Demonstrators who forced the ousters of strongmen leaders Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan in 2019 learned from Egyptians' experiences ten years ago, particularly regarding the importance of maintaining unity within an ideologically diverse revolutionary coalition and not trusting the military (Clarke 2019; Kushkush 2019). Egyptians might very well take the same lessons from their own past challenges.

A demonstrator holds an Egyptian flag in Tahrir Square, June 5, 2012. Photo: Lilian Wagdy/Flickr

If a united front against military rule can be maintained in a subsequent transition, Egypt is more likely to democratize. However, powerful militaries with a history of political intervention are also more likely to launch coups again (Londregan and Poole 1990), especially when they feel that their interests are threatened by civilian authorities (Acemoglu, Ticchi, and Vindigni 2010). For Egypt to democratize successfully, the new political system will probably still need to offer substantial protections and privileges for the military for many years, despite the anti-democratic nature of such compromises (Albertus and Menaldo 2014). Maintaining a balance between pressuring the military to accept civilian governance and convincing the military that it is not unduly threatened under democracy will be a core challenge of any future transition.

Finally, foreign powers must be cognizant of their own role in perpetuating authoritarianism in Egypt. Dictators have more capacity to repress mass opposition when they know they are less likely to face international pressure (Levitsky and Way 2010). Military regimes that come to power through coups also return to barracks more quickly when they face condemnation from powerful foreign states and international organizations (Thyne et al. 2018). Whether Egyptians are able to force al-Sisi from office and manage a transition to democracy will continue to be influenced heavily by international politics.

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