

250

JULY
2014

THE FALSE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION OF AL-SISI

Ricard Gonz3lez, political scientist and journalist

When, after only a year, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi deposed the *rais* Mohamed Morsi, putting an end to a year-long Islamist experiment in Egypt, he promised to begin a process of democratic transition, which was later incorporated in the so-called road map. The majority of secular parties applauded the military coup in the hope that it would serve to correct the errors made over two convulsive years of transition. Twelve months on, it is evident that the objective of the authorities is not to deepen democracy, but its opposite: the restoration of autocratic order built on new foundations.

While the country has equipped itself with a number of institutions and processes that are, in appearance, democratic (including a constitution that protects individual rights), scratching beneath the surface reveals these changes to be little more than a *faade*. The numbers recorded this year are sufficiently eloquent: more than 2000 people have died at the hands of the security forces and nearly 20,000 have been arrested at protests or for crimes of opinion. Further, many of them have been subjected to torture in police stations and prisons with the government neither acting to prevent it nor to prosecute those responsible. According to the Amnesty International news a year after the coup against Morsi (the 3rd of July of 2014) “on every level Egypt is failing in terms of human rights”.

The activists and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have been the principle victims of state repression. After being labelled a “terrorist organisation”, all the activities of the Islamist fraternity have been banned and funds belonging to its members and related organisations have been frozen. The practical totality of its leadership, including the former *rais* Morsi, finds itself behind bars, facing a string of judicial processes which could lead to harsh penalties. In fact, its Supreme Guide, Mohamed Badie, is already facing an unappealable death sentence. The movement, which became tolerated during the Mubarak regime, has not faced such a harsh blow in more than six decades.

With protest severely restricted by a draconian law on demonstrations, the principal expressions of dissent are the terrorist attacks attributed to jihad-inspired groups. If the security forces have been able to limit the scope of the Islamist insurgency with mass detentions, a wave of attempted attacks at the end of June

demonstrated that these groups' have not yet been defeated. According to the Ministry of Interior, in the space of a year more than 500 soldiers and police officers have died. The terrorist threat has repeatedly been used by the government to justify the curtailment of rights and police excess.

Since the end of last year, the siege by police and legal authorities has also been extended to secular activists, including some of the symbols of the 2011 revolution, such as Ahmed Maher and Alaa Abdel Fattah. Dozens of young revolutionaries have been given long prison sentences for simply having participated in "illegal demonstrations". In an effort to silence any dissident voices, newspapers and television stations close to the opposition have been closed down. Nearly twenty journalists and collaborators from the Al Jazeera network received harsh sentences of between seven and ten years in prison in a trial that had great media impact.

While Western countries have raised their voices to censor the worst excesses of the repressive campaign, such as the brutal evictions of the Islamist camps of Raba al-Adawiya or the mass death sentences handed out in Minya, they seem to be resigned to the consolidation of the current regime. During the days that followed the coup d'état, the Muslim Brotherhood leaders believed that Western pressure would reverse the situation, that hope has since been shown to have been an illusion. The Egyptian government, under the guardianship of the army, has easily compensated for the reduction in Western aid with the generous contributions made by the petro-monarchies of the Persian Gulf. In the space of a year, Egypt has received more than 20 billion dollars from the Gulf, a figure that makes the partial suspension of the 1.2 billion dollars given annually by the United States look like crumbs.

Nevertheless, the regime faces serious challenges in the coming months. The greatest of these is the need to apply substantial cuts to public expenditure, as the public deficit has become unsustainable, having risen above 12% in the past three years. The brand new *rais*, Sisi, insists on the necessity of facing up to sacrifices and has suggested an important reduction in petrol subsidies. It remains to be seen how capable he is of applying such an unpopular measure, which was announced but never implemented by his predecessors

The other challenge is the celebration of elections to the legislature, planned to take place in the autumn, which would be the culmination of the current road map. The government has put forward an electoral law that marginalises political parties in favour of individual candidacies, something that favours the despots of the Mubarak era. It is an attempt to control the political life of the country from the Heliopolis presidential palace. The majority of secular parties have categorically rejected the law and may boycott the elections.

The low turn-out for the presidential elections in May, at which Sisi swept to power with 96% of the vote, suggests that his support is in decline. The country's youth—the group that led the 2011 revolution against Hosni Mubarak—had the highest rate of abstention. If he is unable to improve the living conditions of Egyptians over the coming months, the new *rais* may face a new wave of demonstrations. Despite the repressive zeal of the security forces, and the longing for stability of a large part of the population, a final act of rebellion cannot be ruled out in a society still seized by the revolutionary spirit.