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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of authoritarian governance in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, contrasting it with his predecessor Hosni Mubarak's dominant-party electoral authoritarianism. Following the January 25 Revolution and Mubarak's ousting in 2011, Egypt experienced a brief period of democratization before the 2013 military coup installed Sisi as president. Unlike Mubarak's reliance on a dominant party, Sisi's regime consolidates power through state institutions, particularly the military, judiciary, and religious authorities. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, this research draws on primary and secondary sources to analyze the mechanisms of regime stability and authoritarian consolidation. To contextualize its findings, this study applies the theoretical frameworks of electoral authoritarianism, strongman politics, and institutional legitimacy. Findings indicate that Sisi has supplanted Mubarak's party-centered model with a multifaceted strategy characterized by legal manipulation, institutional cooptation, and the depoliticization of the public sphere, aimed at suppressing political discourse and neutralizing potential spaces for opposition and dissent. This research provides crucial insights into the adaptability of authoritarian regimes and their impact on Egypt's political trajectory.

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Abstract

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Keywords: Electoral authoritarianism, institutional legitimacy, military dominance, regime consolidation, depoliticization

1. Introduction

In early 2011, the "January 25 Revolution" became a pivotal moment in Egypt's political history, resulting in the ousting of long-time president Hosni Mubarak and starting a military-supervised transition period. However, the hopes for democratization were brief. The 2013 military coup, led by then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, ousted President Mohamed Morsi, suspended the constitution, and ultimately reestablished authoritarian rule. Over a decade later, Sisi has consolidated power through a governance model distinct from Mubarak's party-based authoritarianism.

Unlike Mubarak, who relied on the National Democratic Party (NDP) for control, Sisi has avoided forming a dominant ruling party. Instead, he implements a multifaceted strategy focused on the military, judiciary, and religious institutions to suppress dissent and stabilize his regime. This shift raises questions about the sustainability of Sisi's approach in a political system traditionally supported by dominant parties. By abandoning party-centered structures, Sisi redefined authoritarian rule in Egypt, prioritizing institutional dominance and legal manipulation over traditional mechanisms of political control.

This study examines the transformation of authoritarian governance under Sisi, emphasizing how his regime has replaced the NDP's functions with alternative consolidation methods. By analyzing repressive tactics, legal frameworks, and institutional cooptation, the study highlights the strategies that reinforce Sisi's authority while avoiding the vulnerabilities of dominant-party systems. It contextualizes these changes within the broader literature on electoral authoritarianism (EA) and institutional legitimacy, providing insights into the adaptability of authoritarian regimes and their implications for Egypt's political future.

2. Research design and methodology

A. <u>Research Design</u>

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to thoroughly investigate the persistence and evolution of authoritarian rule in Egypt, with a particular focus on President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's tenure. It examines the regime's consolidation of power without a dominant ruling party, contrasting this strategy with Hosni Mubarak's party-based authoritarianism. By exploring the Mubarak and Sisi eras, this research highlights how authoritarian practices have evolved in response to changing political contexts and societal demands. Central to the analysis are the crucial roles of state institutions, notably the military, judiciary, and religious authorities, in maintaining regime stability and quelling dissent. To contextualize these findings, the study employs theoretical frameworks on EA, strongman politics, and institutional legitimacy, providing insights into the mechanisms and resilience of contemporary Egypt's authoritarian governance.

B. <u>Methodology</u>

1. Data Collection

To analyze Egypt's political dynamics, the study draws on secondary sources, such as academic literature, government documents, and media reports. Qualitative content analysis was performed on legal documents and policy statements by Sisi and other regime figures to reveal the discursive and structural mechanisms underpinning authoritarian consolidation. These sources provide a comprehensive insight of the strategies employed to reinforce regime control and legitimacy.

2. Case Studies

The Mubarak-era (1981–2011) and the Sisi era (2014–present) are used as case studies in this research. The Mubarak period emphasized using the NDP to sustain EA and consolidate control, whereas the Sisi era examined the shift from party-centered governance to institutional

dominance by the military, judiciary, and religious authorities. By grounding the analysis in these case studies, the research offers a refined understanding of the evolution of Egypt's authoritarian strategies.

3. Analytical Framework

Utilizing three interrelated theoretical frameworks, this analysis investigates the mechanisms behind authoritarian resilience in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. EA's framework highlights how authoritarian regimes manipulate elections to project a facade of democratic legitimacy while marginalizing opposition forces. It contrasts Mubarak's reliance on the NDP with Sisi's centralized, non-party-based governance model. Complementing this, the lens of strongman politics explores Sisi's strategy of bypassing traditional party structures to consolidate personal authority through direct control of state institutions. This approach ensures institutional loyalty but exposes the regime to vulnerabilities during political or economic crises. Finally, the framework of institutional legitimacy highlights Sisi's cooptation of key state institutions—including the military, judiciary, and religious authorities—through strategies such as legal repression, economic incentives, and ideological alignment. These tactics reinforce their loyalty and project stability and legitimacy despite limited popular support. Together, these frameworks provide a thorough understanding of Sisi's governance model and its ability to adapt to Egypt's evolving political landscape.

3. **Electoral Authoritarianism (EA) and Regime Stability: A Literature Review of the Benefits and Drawbacks**

EA, a hybrid system that combines elections with authoritarian control, is distinguished by its ability to both simulate democratic legitimacy and preserve centralized power. It serves as both a stabilizing force and a potential vulnerability for regimes. Controlled elections allow authoritarian governments to project legitimacy both domestically and internationally while

managing elite and public dissent. However, these systems also face inherent risks due to their reliance on manipulated political participation.

A key advantage of EA is its ability to enhance regime legitimacy. As highlighted by Scott Williamson, even flawed electoral processes can create perceptions of fairness, which consequently increase public compliance and reduce dissent. Williamson's study, using survey data from eight Arab authoritarian countries, including Egypt, shows that perceptions of electoral quality significantly influence both legitimacy beliefs and compliance behaviors. By employing strategies such as propaganda and symbolic election monitors, regimes create an illusion of democratic norms, reducing the need for overt coercion. This perception of legitimacy stabilizes regimes by reducing dependence on costly repressive measures and enhancing resilience to shocks (Williamson 2021).

Elections can also enhance international acceptance. According to Miller, autocratic leaders strategically adopt EA regimes to balance international incentives with the costs and risks associated with managing elections. This adoption is driven by the desire to gain international benefits, such as increased aid, trade, and military alliances, which are nominally aimed at promoting democracy. EA is more likely to be adopted when autocrats believe they can control the electoral process; this strategic decision is influenced by the ability to maintain electoral dominance through clientelism and state assistance (Miller 2017).

Elections also strengthen EA regimes by aligning elite interests with the state. In her analysis of elections and clientelism in the Middle East, Lust-Okar demonstrates how elections provide a platform for elites to compete over state resources rather than policy changes or democratic governance, thereby reinforcing existing authoritarian structures. Lust-Okar argues that "competitive clientelism" is key; elections enable elites to distribute state resources to their clients in return for political support. This creates a cycle where elites and their supporters are incentivized to maintain the status quo, ensuring continued benefits and reducing demands for

genuine political change, thereby maintaining public compliance (Lust-Okar 2009). Similarly, Blaydes's *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* presents key arguments on how elections sustain authoritarian regimes. According to Blaydes, elections in Mubarak's Egypt functioned as a clientelism mechanism with legislative office seekers distributing resources to constituents in exchange for electoral support. Blaydes also argues that competitive elections regulate intraelite competition within the ruling class. Allowing elites to compete for legislative positions ensured their continued investment in the political system, thus promoting regime durability. Blaydes argues that, contrary to the belief that Mubarak's elections were entirely rigged or non-competitive, many electoral contests were genuinely competitive. Politicians were often promoted based on their performance and ability to secure votes, rather than solely on nepotism, which did exist at the regime's peak (Blaydes 2010).

Elections also create a controlled environment for competition within the ruling elite. This intraelite rivalry helps the regime manage potential conflicts by periodically reshuffling positions within the lower echelons of the elite, thereby curbing the formation of alternative power networks. Several studies have shown that authoritarian regimes are more stable and resilient when ruling elites are organized into a dominant party. For instance, dominant ruling parties help maintain elite cohesion and regime stability by providing career advancement opportunities, ensuring that loyal elites gain leadership roles (Reuter and Turovsky 2014). They also mobilize mass support through grassroots organizations and linkages with social organizations (Zeng 2021).

Additionally, controlled opposition participation enables regimes to coopt dissent and maintain stability. Wiebrecht highlights that limited inclusion in legislatures channels opposition into formal institutions, reducing the likelihood of revolutionary challenges. Wiebrecht further explains that an opposition presence in parliament can lead to policy concessions by the dictator (Wiebrecht 2021). Meanwhile, Albrecht argues that such

cooptation stabilizes regimes by preventing dissent from escalating into organized resistance. Incentivized by limited privileges, the opposition adheres to regime rules, thus reinforcing authoritarian structures. This controlled opposition helps the regime monitor, manage, and channel dissent effectively. According to Albrecht, Egypt's opposition has supported the regime through functions such as rent-seeking, where opposition parties and NGOs attract international aid and support, which the regime can control and utilize (Albrecht 2005). Koehler also demonstrates that including the opposition under Mubarak gave the leverage to manage and discipline opposition activities, ensuring that their actions do not threaten regime stability. Crucially, the limited legal privileges gained by the opposition incentivize them to adhere to the regime's rules (Koehler 2008).

However, the long-term viability of EA faces significant challenges. Manipulated elections risk eroding legitimacy, as demonstrated by Way's analysis of Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Declining public trust often forces regimes to increase repression, worsening discontent and heightening the likelihood of uprisings (Way 2005). Based on case studies from various regions, Morse's comparative analysis of different electoral authoritarian regimes highlights that overreliance on coercion can destabilize regimes, especially when public dissatisfaction reaches a tipping point (Morse 2012). Levitsky and Way investigate the factors that contribute to the resilience of party-based authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on their ability to withstand crises. They find that, while access to power and resources typically secures elite cooperation during stable periods, this mechanism often breaks down during crises when the regime faces serious challenges (Levitsky and Way 2012). Blaydes's findings from Mubarak's Egypt demonstrate how corruption and electoral fraud led to widespread disillusionment and mass protests, resulting in the regime's collapse in 2011 (Blaydes 2010).

Elections in EA regimes act as a double-edged sword, creating opportunities for opposition mobilization. Although intended to bolster legitimacy, elections offer a platform for dissenters

to organize and gain visibility. Shirah's analysis of 136 authoritarian regimes reveals increased unrest during election years, as competitive elections reduce barriers to collective action. Shirah reveals a dilemma for authoritarian rulers: while appearing democratic offers certain advantages, it also increased the risk of political dissent (Shirah 2016). Apolte demonstrates that mass protests often fracture ruling elites, paving the way for revolutionary change (Apolte 2022, 981-996). For example, during the mass uprising leading to Mubarak's fall, the military and other state institutions aligned with the public, seizing a political opportunity to facilitate the regime's ouster. Albrecht and Koehler further argue that prolonged low-level activism enhances organizational capacity and strategic knowledge, increasing the likelihood of successful uprisings. They note that prior contentious activism acts as a "practice run," enabling participants to better understand the personal risk associated with different forms of activism and the capacities and strategies of coercive forces (Albrecht and Koehler 2020).

Recognizing the risks associated with traditional electoral authoritarian models, the Sisi regime in Egypt has deliberately abandoned reliance on a dominant ruling party and electoral competition as tools for regime maintenance. Instead, Sisi has prioritized the depoliticization of the public sphere to neutralize political engagement and consolidate power within state institutions. By substituting formal party structures with extensive clientelism networks and informal mechanisms, the regime has effectively curtailed opportunities for public mobilization while ensuring compliance, thereby maintaining its grip on power without the constraints of a politicized society.

This paper is organized into several sections, each focusing on a distinct aspect of authoritarian rule in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. It begins by examining how EA under Hosni Mubarak contributed to regime stability. Controlled elections were used to maintain the appearance of legitimacy while suppressing genuine political competition. The

discussion then transitions to the lasting influence of the ancien régime, especially the military and judiciary, in shaping Egypt's post-Mubarak political landscape. The analysis delves Sisi's methods of authoritarian consolidation, emphasizing his shift from a dominant party model and his dependence on state institutions to solidify control. The final sections explore the crucial roles of the military, judiciary, and religious authorities in maintaining a resilient authoritarian system. They also critically assess the vulnerabilities and risks that could challenge the long-term viability of this governance model.

4. Authoritarianism and Party Dominance Under Mubarak's Rule

Following the 1952 coup, Egypt's multiparty parliamentary system was abolished, marking a shift towards centralized authoritarian rule. In the 1970s, however, President Anwar Sadat (1970–1981) reinstated the multiparty system as part of his broader efforts to dismantle the single-party state that had been established under his predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970). Sadat's political reforms had two main goals: shifting Egypt's foreign policy from the Soviet Union to the United States and consolidating his power by undermining the Nasserite opposition. In 1976, he introduced limited political pluralism by permitting internal competition within the ruling Arab Socialist Union, creating left, center, and right platforms (Ayubi 1982). The center platform, represented by the Egypt (Misr) Party, won the 1976 parliamentary elections, leading to the formation of the NDP in 1977. This transition marked Egypt's shift from a single-party state to an electoral authoritarian regime dominated by the NDP, with the business elite significantly influencing its path (Hinnebusch 1981, Moore 1974).

Sadat's electoral framework enabled elites to access state resources through rent-seeking mechanisms. Elections were used to coopt influential local figures into the system, bolstering the regime's legitimacy while preventing mass opposition's mobilization. Members of

Parliament were granted privileged access to state institutions, allowing them to distribute public goods in exchange for political loyalty. This system not only solidified Sadat's authority but also suppressed opposition forces, ensuring that political participation remained tightly controlled (Hinnebusch 1981).

Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), who succeeded Sadat, built on this foundation and reinforced the NDP's dominance throughout his 30-year rule (Lust-Okar 2005). Mubarak kept the NDP at the core of his regime, merging party leadership with key state institutions. High-ranking party officials held influential government positions, ensuring a seamless overlap between the party and the state. This concentration of power enabled Mubarak to manipulate electoral processes, suppress opposition, and centralize authority within the executive branch. Under his leadership, Egypt became a police state, with domestic security forces replacing the military as the regime's primary instrument of coercion (Brownlee 2007, 79, Heiss 2012, 4). The authority's concentration within the executive branch enabled the NDP, in coordination with the bureaucracy and state security apparatus, to implement policies without obstruction (Blaydes 2010, Shehata 2008).

Mubarak used a mix of legal and extralegal tactics to control elections, such as voter intimidation, electoral fraud, and state security to suppress dissent (Shukrallah 2008, Hibbard and Layton 2010). The regime's military campaign against Islamist militants in the 1990s served a pretext for increasing repression against nonviolent political dissent. In the December 1990, parliamentary elections were held after a court ruling declared the 1987 elections unconstitutional; major opposition parties, including al-Wafd and the Islamic Alliance, boycotted the elections due to insufficient safeguards against fraud. This boycott enabled the NDP to secure a larger majority than in 1987 (Mumtaz 2011). The 1995 elections, characterized by widespread violence and fraud, resulted in the NDP securing a record 94% parliamentary majority (Makram-Ebeid 1996).

Electoral reforms, such as judicial oversight introduced in the 2000 elections, temporarily enhanced transparency and allowed limited opportunities for opposition gains. This led to a relative decline in the NDP's dominance, which secured 87% of the vote (Makram-Ebeid 2001).

However, these reforms also exposed the regime's vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) success in the 2005 elections. Despite being officially banned, it won 88 seats, or roughly 20% of parliament. These elections highlighted the differing strengths of opposition groups. The MB emerged as a significant parliamentary force, while traditional parties continued to struggle due to internal challenges and governmental constraints (Meital 2006). The NDP's failure to adapt to these challenges ultimately exposed the inherent fragility of dominant-party systems dependent on managed electoral processes.

Mubarak's strategy included constitutional amendments aimed at ensuring his son, Gamal, would succeed him. In 2005, he amended Article 76 of the Egyptian Constitution allowing political parties to contest the presidency for the first time (Brown, Dunne, and Hamzawy 2007). By introducing multicandidate presidential elections with stringent eligibility criteria, the regime aimed to project an image of reform while ensuring Gamal's path to power. However, these efforts alienated the military, which saw Gamal's neoliberal agenda as a threat to the military's economic interests (Shama 2019). The military's discontent, coupled with growing public outrage over corruption, electoral fraud, and repression, culminated in the November 2010 parliamentary elections. These elections, marked by unprecedented manipulation and violence, excluded opposition forces and awarded the NDP 97% of parliamentary seats, further inflaming political tensions.

In the final decade of his rule, Hosni Mubarak boosted his son Gamal's prominence within the NDP and the policy secretariat, appointing his allies to key cabinet positions and amending the constitution to ease Gamal's succession. These measures aimed to boost Gamal's influence over policy decisions while sidelining the old guard. His political rise featured economic and

political liberalization efforts, aimed at projecting an image of reform and modernization domestically and internationally, gaining support from business elites and the global community (Zahid 2010). Gamal built an institutional base within the NDP, but his rise was limited by entrenched political structures, especially the military, which viewed him and his neoliberal allies with suspicion. The military opposed Gamal's economic agenda, fearing that it threatened their financial interests. Had Mubarak's succession plans succeeded, Gamal would have been Egypt's first civilian president since it became a republic in 1953—breaking the tradition of military leadership.

The escalating dissent of 2011 led to mass protests, which ultimately toppled Mubarak's regime. Activist groups, such as Kefaya and the April 6th Youth Movement, combined with public outrage over police brutality—exemplified by Khaled Said's killing—mobilized citizens against the regime. The storming of NDP buildings and state institutions symbolized the collapse of Mubarak's authoritarian regime (Ismail 2012). Key judicial rulings on April 16 and June 28, 2011, dissolved the NDP and municipal councils, dismantling the regime's political infrastructure and paving the way for a reconfigured political landscape in Egypt (Hamad May 2013). Mubarak's fall highlighted AE's vulnerabilities, especially its reliance on manufactured legitimacy and the suppression of dissent.

Mubarak's collapse has significantly shaped the governance strategies of subsequent regimes, especially under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Sisi's regime deliberately avoided dominant-party politics, recognizing that electoral manipulation and public mobilization contributed to Mubarak's downfall. Rather, Sisi focused on depoliticizing the public sphere, using state institutions and informal mechanisms to maintain control. By avoiding heavily politicized electoral processes, the regime has limited opposition mobilization while consolidating power through the military and state security apparatus.

This change marks a broader shift in authoritarian governance in Egypt. Under Sadat and Mubarak, EA not only allowed controlled political participation, but also created spaces for dissent and opposition, ultimately destabilizing the regime. Conversely, Sisi's approach focuses on demobilizing society and centralizing authority to ensure a more stable, albeit repressive, political order. This strategy reflects the ongoing adaptation of authoritarian rule in response to Egypt's political history.

5. Influence of the Ancien Régime on the Post-Mubarak Transition

Mubarak's resignation on February 11, 2011, marked the collapse of an electoral authoritarian regime sustained by a dominant party system. His departure, facilitated by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), highlighted the military's crucial role in Egypt's political framework. Before the 2011 uprising, the military maintained significant indirect control over the political system, protecting its interests while avoiding direct governance and accountability for policy failures (Cook 2007).

Under Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak—each a former military officer—the presidency prioritized the military's privileges and neutralized internal threats (Springborg 1987). However, in 2011, the military dissolved the NDP, neutralized the presidency, and reasserted its dominance. This shift echoed the 1952 Free Officers Movement, which abolished the monarchy and established military rule. The SCAF's removal of Mubarak aligned temporarily with the January 2011 uprising, preventing Gamal Mubarak's succession and allowing the military to reassert authority and retain political control.

After Mubarak's fall, the SCAF governed with judiciary support. Judicial rulings dismantled Mubarak-era economic policies, dissolved the NDP, and invalidated elections, allowing the military to safeguard its privileges and shape the post-Mubarak political landscape (Pioppi 2013). The SCAF, acting as a veto player, constrained transitional justice, protected

regime loyalists, and controlled the new constitution's drafting. By framing political change within legal boundaries, the SCAF subjected the uprising's demands to judicial processes and rejected proposals for specialized courts to prosecute former regime members.

Yefet (2024) argues that transitional justice mechanisms, including selective prosecutions and fact-finding commissions, were used to reinforce military dominance. Trials targeted corruption and economic crimes of Mubarak-era elites linked to neoliberal policies while avoiding accountability for police violence and political crimes, ensuring impunity for security forces.

The judiciary, influenced by the military and police (Ramadan 2016),[1] blocked political transformation by not holding senior officers accountable for killing protesters. By controlling the judiciaryand suppressing independent tribunals, the military exploited political divisions, preserved power structures, and entrenched its dominance. Fact-finding commissions depicted violence during the 2011 uprising as isolated incidents, avoiding systemic scrutiny. Meanwhile, civil society's efforts to document the revolution were suppressed, erasing revolutionary narratives and further strengthening military rule.

Post-Mubarak electoral politics, while appearing to signal democratic transition, instilled Egypt's authoritarian framework and obstructed genuine civilian governance. Weak democratic institutions, political polarization, and fragile political parties hindered the democratization process. The military and judiciary manipulated electoral mechanisms to maintain dominance, with major elections failing to challenge their authority. The MB's electoral successes heightened political polarization, increasing public support for judicial and military interventions. These institutions exploited political fractures to consolidate control,

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[1] Ramadan explores the deep ties between Egypt's judiciary, executive, and police, highlighting how these relationships undermine judicial independence and impartiality. He emphasizes the Ministry of Interior's dominance over law enforcement, the executive's influence over the Minister of Justice, and the close collaboration between the police and public prosecution. These interconnections often align judicial functions with executive priorities and police authority, compromising judicial autonomy and impartially.

protect privileges, and sustain authoritarian rule. Consequently, between Mubarak's resignation and Morsi's ouster, political instability prevailed as state institutions reinforced their dominance and marginalized democratic transition prospects.

*5.1.*Military and Judicial Interventions in Egypt's Post-Uprising Period *(2011-2013)*

The post-Mubarak period in Egypt revealed the enduring nature of authoritarianism, as electoral processes were systematically manipulated to preserve entrenched power structures and obstruct meaningful democratic transitions. Between Mubarak's resignation in February 2011 and Morsi's removal in July 2013, Egyptians participated in five major electoral events, including constitutional referendums and parliamentary and presidential elections. Despite high voter turnout and widespread optimism, these events failed to weaken military dominance or establish sustainable civilian governance.

The MB, capitalizing on its organizational capacity, emerged as the dominant political actor, exacerbating polarization between Islamist and non-Islamist factions. Secular groups, wary of Islamist control, advocated for drafting a constitution before holding parliamentary elections. However, these efforts were sidelined as the MB-led coalition secured 47% of parliamentary seats, with Salafist parties gaining an additional 25%, leaving secular parties such as the Wafd Party and the Egypt Bloc with only marginal representation (Kirkpatrick 2012). Islamist dominance extended to the constituent assembly, further marginalizing secular voices and shaping the transition in favor of Islamist priorities.

This dominance, however, was met with significant resistance. In June 2012, the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) annulled the parliamentary elections, prompting the SCAF to dissolve parliament and reclaim legislative authority. While non-Islamist factions saw these actions as necessary to limit MB overreach, the MB perceived them as a concerted effort by

the "deep state" to derail its reform agenda. This mutual distrust exacerbated political polarization and stymied compromise.

Morsi's governance strategies further heightened tensions. His unilateral decision to rule by decree alienated large segments of the population, while the narrowly approved 2012 constitution introduced contentious provisions. Article 177 curtailed judicial oversight of election laws, effectively insulating election outcomes from legal challenges, while Articles 195 and 197 institutionalized military privileges, including shielding the military budget from public scrutiny and mandating that the defense minister be a military officer (Brown 2013, Abul-Magd 2016). These measures deepened societal divisions, alienated reformist judges, and consolidated military control, contributing to widespread political instability.

As clashes with the judiciary, non-Islamist factions, and the police intensified, Morsi became increasingly isolated. His reliance on the SCAF to protect MB electoral gains weakened his autonomy and further entrenched the authority of state institutions. Both Islamist and non-Islamist factions utilized these institutions to advance their respective agendas, perpetuating authoritarian practices. While opposition forces remained fragmented, state institutions, particularly the military and judiciary, acted cohesively to safeguard their privileges. The military leveraged its entrenched influence to dominate political processes, steer constitution-making, and maintain executive control. Concurrently, judicial rulings nullified elected bodies and upheld authoritarian rule, ensuring the military's dominance regardless of election outcomes.

Egypt's post-uprising period underscores the challenges of democratization in hybrid regimes, where entrenched institutions manipulate democratic mechanisms to maintain control. Despite high voter engagement and initial optimism, democratization efforts faltered due to procedural reforms that lacked substantive structural change. The MB's political ascendancy exacerbated polarization, undermining consensus-building and enabling state institutions to

exploit divisions and consolidate power. The 2012 constitution institutionalized military privileges and curtailed judicial oversight, further entrenching authoritarianism.

This period highlights the critical need for institutional reforms, inclusive political processes, and efforts to bridge societal divides to achieve genuine democratic transitions. The following section explores the consolidation of power under Sisi, examining the shift from party-based authoritarianism to a regime dominated by military and judicial control, which redefined power dynamics to suppress dissent and sustain regime stability.

6. Strategies of Control: Unpacking Power Consolidation in Sisi's Egypt

After Morsi's ouster, state institutions under military leadership consolidated full control over Egypt's political landscape, signifying a major restructuring of power rather than a simple return to Mubarak-era EA. In contrast to the Sadat and Mubarak regimes that depended on dominant ruling parties, Sisi's regime discarded structures. Rather, it utilized the military's influence over state institutions to broaden its political, economic, and bureaucratic reach. Central to this strategy were the judiciary and religious institutions, which were crucial in legitimizing the regime and consolidating its power.

During the transitional period, a military-appointed government led by Justice Adly Mansour, the president of the SCC, served as the interim president. Under Mansour's leadership, the January 2014 Constitution further entrenched the autonomy of the military and police by protecting them from civilian oversight. In May 2014, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the former head of the armed forces, was elected president, solidifying the military's dominance in shaping the new political order.

This section analyzes Sisi's strategic decision to govern without a civilian dominant party, highlighting the crucial roles of state institutions, especially the judiciary and al-Azhar, in

legitimizing his regime. This study explores how these entities provided essential support, reinforcing state authority and ensuring the stability of Sisi's governance model.

6.1.Lessons From the Past: Why Sisi Rejected the Dominant-Party System

The 2011 uprising and the subsequent military coup against Morsi are key to understanding Sisi's rejection of the dominant-party model of EA. The uprising was driven by public opposition to the NDP, which had become a symbol of corruption, nepotism, and electoral manipulation. Aware of the NDP's role in maintaining authoritarianism and sparking revolutionary fervor, Sisi likely avoided forming a new ruling party to prevent evoking memories of the NDP's dominance and the risk of public backlash. This strategy also prevented the emergence of a party that could develop its own power base and challenge his authority. Rather, Sisi presented himself as a leader who prioritized national unity and stability over partisan politics, a narrative crucial for consolidating power in a politically fragmented postuprizing Egypt.

By 2014, Sisi encountered minimal pressure to democratize, both internally and externally, as public enthusiasm for democratic reform had diminished. This decline was due to the rise of Islamist groups through elections and the revolutionary forces' failure to secure electoral success. Hamzawy highlights the paradox of Egypt's political landscape: systemic human rights abuses and societal crises under military-led governance did not provoke significant resistance. Rather, disillusioned Egyptians clung government promises of economic improvement, despite worsening poverty, inflation, and unemployment (Hamzawy 2019). This environment enabled Sisi to consolidate power without relying on a dominant party, further shielding his regime from political pressures.

Sisi's governance was characterized by a preference for military structures over civilian political institutions. Unlike his predecessors, who engaged with political parties, Sisi

marginalized these entities in favor of direct military control. Springborg notes that Sisi's lack of political experience and familiarity with military structures allowed him to project an image of an austere, self-sacrificing leader who communicates directly with the public, bypassing traditional political intermediaries (Springborg 2022). This portrayal enhanced his personal authority and enabled him to navigate Egypt's political complexities without the constraints of party politics.

Concerns about durability influenced Sisi's decision to avoid a ruling party. Miller's research shows that ruling parties created through elections often lack stability due to shallow roots and limited coercive capacity. These parties are more prone to instability compared to revolutionary movements with stronger organizational structures and coercive support, which is incompatible with Sisi's reliance on the military (Miller 2020). Adrián del Río highlights the risks of elite defections in weakly institutionalized parties, as internal conflicts can increase regime fragility. Nepstad adds that military defections are more likely when soldiers perceive a regime as unstable. By not forming a ruling party, Sisi maintained tighter cohesion within the military, reducing the risk of dissent and reinforcing his regime's stability during crises (Río 2022, Nepstad 2019).

Under Sisi, Egypt shifted from a dominant-party state to what Yezid Sayigh describes as a military-ruled state. The military extended its influence over governance, the economy, and society, becoming the central force in Egyptian politics. It spearheads state-led development projects and controls public and private media, further consolidating its dominance. Sisi has utilized this institutional power to maintain authority while aligning with the military's economic and political interests (Sayigh 2013). This strategy highlights the regime's reliance on the military to ensure stability and suppress dissent.

6.2.Legislative Fragmentation as a Tool for Authoritarian Control

The 2015 parliamentary elections in Egypt showcased significant state interference aimed at consolidating power and suppressing the opposition. Security agencies, especially the General Intelligence Agency, orchestrated the creation and success of the pro-Sisi *For the Love of Egypt* (FLE) electoral list, securing all 120 party-list seats under their direct supervision. Testimonies from individuals, such as that of Hazem Abdel Azim, a former Sisi campaign official, revealed the regime's intent to establish a compliant legislature. Traditional political parties, such as the Wafd Party, were either coerced or incentivized to join the FLE coalition, while businessmen aligned with the list provided campaign funding in exchange for political influence, further establishing regime dominance. The *Nation's Future Party*, strongly supported by military intelligence and the president's office, played a key role in mobilizing loyalty within constituencies, despite presenting itself as youth-oriented. Many of its candidates were older figures with ties to the dissolved NDP, highlighting its function as a regime instrument (Bahgat 2016).

The electoral framework weakened proportional representation and political diversity, favoring regime-aligned candidates. Nearly 80% of the seats were given to independent candidates, benefiting those with financial resources and strong local networks while marginalizing smaller or emerging parties. The winner-takes-all system for party lists further restricted political diversity, reinforcing the dominance of regime-backed blocs, such as *Nation's Future* and FLE. Moreover, the inclusion of state officials, such as judges and military officers, on electoral lists indicated a shift to a parliamentary model based on regime loyalty and financial influence.

Uncertainties in parliamentary operations, such as the ambiguous role of single-seat deputies and judicial interference in election results, further solidified presidential dominance. These actions transformed parliament into a tool for regime interests, diminishing its legislative significance and public engagement. Quotas in party lists, intended to promote inclusivity,

forced smaller parties to align with regime figures, undermining their independence. Delays in the electoral process allowed the government to issue presidential decrees, effectively limiting new parliament's legislative power before it was even formed (Völkel 2017).

Aziz contends that, instead of creating a dominant-party system, Sisi established a military electoral authoritarian state—a hybrid regime where the military holds ultimate control while presenting an image of democratic governance. In this setup, civilian figures act as intermediaries to implement military-devised policies and absorb public blame for failures, thus shielding the military from criticism. This structure mirrors the monarchical systems in the Middle East, where rulers dissolve parliaments to quell dissent. Aziz highlights how the military manipulates the government, cabinet, and judiciary through a combination of coercion and incentives, ensuring its established dominance. The foundation of this governance model is deliberate parliamentary fragmentation and depoliticization. Aziz notes that Sisi's legislature, comprising over 400 independent members unaffiliated with political parties, lacks cohesion, making deputies susceptible to bribery and coercion (Aziz 2017).

Hesham Sallam elaborates on this "fragmented parliament strategy," detailing how legal and institutional frameworks were manipulated to keep the legislature disorganized and unable to challenge the president. The electoral system's focus on independent candidates over organized political parties weakened party influence, preventing any single force from gaining significant representation. This fragmentation weakened civilian political institutions, hindered opposition development, and consolidated Sisi's control (Sallam 2024).

The 2015 parliamentary elections in Egypt offer crucial insights into how democratic processes can be manipulated to consolidate authoritarian rule. These elections demonstrate how a regime can manipulate state institutions, such as security agencies and intelligence bodies, to shape legislative outcomes, ensuring a compliant parliament that serves its interests. By undermining proportional representation and favoring regime-aligned candidates, the

electoral framework marginalized political diversity and entrenched centralized authority. The preference for independent candidates over party-affiliated representatives fragmented the legislature, rendering it ineffective as a check on presidential power. Aziz and Sallam argue that this intentional disorganization demonstrates how authoritarian regimes use legal and institutional strategies to prevent unified opposition, weaken civilian political institutions, and maintain control. Moreover, the significant involvement of the military and security forces in shaping electoral outcomes underscores the shift to a military electoral authoritarian state, where the appearance of democratic governance conceals entrenched military dominance. These dynamics reveal how authoritarian regimes can manipulate democratic structures to consolidate power, highlighting the critical need for institutional coherence, political pluralism, and independent oversight in fostering genuine democratic transitions.

6.3. Sanctifying Authority: The Intersection of Religious and Political Power

When Egypt's Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced the military's ousting of President Mohamed Morsi on July 3, 2013, he stood alongside prominent religious leaders: Ahmad al-Tayyib, the Shaykh of Al-Azhar; Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Church; and Younes Makhyoun, leader of the Salafist al-Nour Party. This staged event symbolized a deliberate alignment of religious and political authority, designed to legitimize the military's intervention and projecting broad-based support to reassure diverse societal factions. The alignment was framed as key for safeguarding national stability and upholding religious values.

In the aftermath of the coup, religious leaders bolstered the military's legitimacy and secured loyalty. Muslim scholars portrayed the use of force against Morsi's supporters as a religious obligation, addressing concerns of insubordination during unprecedented violence. Clerics distributed videos that fused religious rhetoric with state narratives to legitimize repression and maintain order (Kirkpatrick 2013).

Sisi has since strategically leveraged religion to consolidate power and reinforce his legitimacy. Caridi and Perry highlight his 2014 call for a "religious revolution" at Al-Azhar, which aligned him with the institution's authority while promoting a narrative of modernization within Sunni Islam. Building on Nasser-era practices of subordinating Al-Azhar to state control, Sisi has nationalized religious discourse to diminish the influence of Islamist groups such as the MB and maintain social order, portraying Egypt as a bastion of moderate Islam (Caridi 2015, Perry 2014).

Al-Anani contends that Sisi has coopted religious institutions such as Al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftaa to legitimize his rule. These institutions have publicly endorsed his policies, often framing the opposition as religiously forbidden (*haram*). For instance, Dar al-Iftaa supported Sisi's military threats in Libya and issued fatwas aligning with regime priorities, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and military operations in Sinai, using religious rhetoric to justify repressive measures (Al-Anani 2020, 2022).

Sarkissian and Wainscott highlight the role of religious institutions as tools of authoritarian control. Through the Ministry of Awqaf, the state regulates sermons, restricts mosque activities, and oversees religious appointments to ensure alignment with government policies. By shaping religious education and discourse, the regime has effectively suprressed opposition, integrating religious institutions into its broader governance framework (Sarkissian and Wainscott 2023). Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, Sisi intensified his usage of religious symbolism to portray himself as a devout leader. Initiatives such as the construction of the Middle East's largest mosque and cathedral in the new administrative capital reflected his efforts to assert a distinct religious authority, appeal to a deeply religious electorate, and counter-Islamist opposition (Hassan 2023). Russell highlights Sisi's strategy of neutralizing nonstate Islamic organizations that historically provided social services. By nationalizing and corporatizing these organizations, centralizing control over *zakat* (Islamic charity), and expanding state-led

service provision, the regime reduced their autonomy and mitigated potential political threats, thus consolidating state authority (Russell 2023).

Sisi's strategic use of religion to consolidate power highlights the key role that religious institutions and symbolism can play in reinforcing authoritarian regimes. By aligning religious and political authority, Sisi effectively legitimized his rule, suprresed opposition, and preserved social stability in a politically fragmented society. The cooptation of institutions such as Al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftaa, combined with the nationalization of religious discourse, demonstrates how state control over religious narratives can stifle dissent while presenting an image of moderation. Furthermore, Sisi's integration of religious symbolism into his governance strategy, including large-scale religious projects and rhetoric, underscores the importance of fostering public loyalty through appeals to cultural and spiritual values. His neutralization of nonstate religious organizations and the centralization of religious charity further reveal the use of institutional restructuring to dismantle alternative power centers. Ultimately, Sisi's approach illustrates how authoritarian leaders can manipulate religion as a tool for control. It also highlights the risks of intertwining religious authority with state power, posing significant challenges to democratization and genuine pluralism. These insights are critical for understanding the dynamics of governance in hybrid regimes and the instrumentalization of religion in consolidating authoritarian rule.

6.4. Criminalizing Dissent: The Legal Foundations of Sisi's Regime

Since assuming power, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has strategically employed legal frameworks to bolster his legitimacy, consolidate authority, and project stability. By aligning his policies with constitutional principles, Sisi has sought to justify his governance both domestically and internationally, portraying his rule as lawful while deflecting criticism. Steven Cook observes that authoritarian regimes frequently use a veneer of legalism to

legitimize repressive actions. In Egypt, Sisi's 2021 amendments to the antiterrorism law exemplify this strategy, broadenign presidential and military powers to suppress dissent while maintaining apparent legality. These legal processes create a semblance of democratic legitimacy, deflecting international criticism and strengthening domestic control (Cook 2021).

Amr Hamzawy underscores the critical role of legal instruments in suppressing political opposition and curtailing civil society under Sisi's regime. Legislation such as the 2013 Protest Law, NGO regulations, amendments to the Penal Code, and the 2015 Terrorism Law have been deployed to stifle dissent, limit public assembly, and label opposition as a threat to national security. Law 136 of 2014 expanded military jurisdiction over civilians, enabling repressive actions under the guise of maintaining public order. Collectively, these measures have narrowed political pluralism and entrenched authoritarian control (Hamzawy 2017).

The Terrorist Entities Law (Law 8 of 2015) further illustrates the regime's repressive approach, employing vague and expansive definitions of terrorism to target nonviolent activists and opposition figures. This law has resulted in severe consequences including asset freezes, organizational dissolutions, and revocations of political rights, creating a pervasive climate of fear thus discouraging activism. Although originally framed as part of counter-terrorism efforts, the law's politicized application—such as targeting individuals associated with the January 25 Revolution and the MB—has served to consolidate authoritarian power under the pretense of national security (TIMEP 2019, HRW 2017).

Alice Finden and Sagnik Dutta contend that the regime's use of moral and legal rhetoric to frame dissent as a threat to national stability reflects a colonial legacy of authoritarian governance. By framing opposition as dangerous or immoral, the state legitimizes repressive measures and maintains a facade of legality, enabling it to curtail civil liberties and suppress diverse groups, including journalists and religious organizations (Finden and Dutta 2024).

The regime has also dismantled the symbols of the January 2011 uprising using laws such as the Protest Law and the Terrorist Entities Law, which have criminalized dissent and delegitimized opposition movements. These laws furtherr restricted nongovernmental organizations, weakening civil society and suppressing political pluralism.

More broadly, Sisi's regime has adeptly exploited ambiguously defined legal frameworks to consolidate power and stifle dissent while projecting an image of constitutional legitimacy. By expanding executive and military authority and criminalizing peaceful opposition, the regime has effectively constrained civil society and undermined democratic engagement. This deliberate strategy reinforces domestic control, deflects international scrutiny, and perpetuates authoritarian rule under the guise of legality.

The insights derived from Sisi's strategic use of legal frameworks reveal the intricacies of authoritarian governance disguised as constitutional legitimacy. First, the regime illustrates how legalism can be weaponized to suppress dissent, utilizing ambiguous laws and expansive powers to criminalize peaceful opposition and civil liberties. Second, this approach undescroes the dual function of such frameworks: domestically, they consolidate state control by instilling fear and restricting political pluralism; internationally, they deflect criticism by projecting adherence to democratic norms. Third, the regime's appropriation of both moral and legal rhetoric underscores a colonial legacy of authoritarian governance, where opposition is framed as dangerous or immoral, justifying repressive measures. Finally, the dismantling of the symbols of the January 2011 uprising and systematic targeting of activists and organizations exemplify how authoritarian regimes aim to erase democratic aspirations and consolidate control by undermining civil society. These observations highlight the importance of critically examining how legal systems can be exploited to sustain authoritarian power, emphasizing the need for robust protections of civil liberties and transparent legal frameworks to enable authentic democratic engagement.

7. Conclusion: Sisi's Authoritarian Resilience

This paper explored the mechanisms sustaining authoritarian rule in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, highlighting the strategic shifts distinguishing his regime from that of his predecessor, Hosni Mubarak. A key aspect of Sisi's governance is his deliberate rejection of Mubarak's reliance on a dominant ruling party for political control. By eschewing party-based authoritarian frameworks, Sisi minimizes the risks of public mobilization and organized opposition—dynamics that contributed significantly to Mubarak's downfall during the 2011 revolution. Instead, Sisi consolidates power through the cooptation of key state institutions, particularly the military, judiciary, and religious authorities, thereby depoliticizing the public sphere and marginalizing political dissent.

Sisi's strategy is based on the manipulation of legal frameworks to reinforce regime control. By restructuring electoral processes and political institutions, the regime projects an image of constitutional legitimacy while managing civil society and suppressing political activities. Electoral mechanisms under Sisi are intentionally designed to divide opposition by favoring independent candidates with substantial financial resources, these measures sideline emerging political parties and hinder the formation of unified opposition coalitions. Such measures consolidate the regime's stability while limiting opportunities for political contestation.

Another defining feature of Sisi's governance model is institutional cooptation. Religious institutions such as al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftaa have been instrumentalized to endorse the regime's policies, with Sisi positioning himself as a proponent of moderate Islam. By employing religious discourse to justify state actions and policies, the regime not only strengthens its perceived legitimacy but also enhances Sisi's image as a unifying leader committed to preserving both social and religious harmony. This strategic alignment between the state and religious authorities further consolidates his authority.

Sisi's governance also heavily relies on depoliticization. By circumventing reliance on electoral politics—which under Mubarak had provided a platform for public mobilization and dissent—the regime ruled through state institutions rather than popular support. This approach effectively neutralizes potential opposition by demobilizing the public and preempting the organization of resistance movements.

While Sisi's governance model has proven effective in the short term, its sustainability remains uncertain. The regime's heavy dependence on repression, legal manipulation, and institutional cooptation may ultimately erode its legitimacy, particularly amid escalating socioeconomic challenges and growing political discontent. The absence of a unifying party structure introduces inherent fragilities, leaving the regime vulnerable to crises that could expose its reliance on coercion and institutional dominance.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on authoritarian resilience by examining the adaptive strategies employed by the Sisi regime against Egypt's evolving political landscape. It highlights the regime's success in maintaining stability through innovative mechanisms while also underscoring the risks of a governance model that circumvents traditional party-based authoritarian structures. This analysis raises critical questions on the long-term viability of this approach, offering insights into the interplay between repression, institutional cooptation, and the fragility of authoritarian rule.

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