



CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Congressional Testimony

**EGYPT: SECURITY, HUMAN RIGHTS,
AND REFORM**

Michele Dunne

Director and Senior Fellow

Middle East Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Testimony before U.S. House Subcommittee on
the Middle East and North Africa

July 24, 2018

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, ranking member Deutch, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. While Egypt is not in the headlines these days, there are important and worrying developments in security, economy, foreign policy, human rights, and politics—all of which have implications for the country's stability. In my testimony, I will focus on domestic politics.

With the beginning of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's second term, Egypt is undergoing a deepening of authoritarianism verging on totalitarianism. As you are aware, Egypt's rocky attempt at a democratic transition began in early 2011 and ended with a military coup in July 2013. During the first half of 2018, President Sisi eliminated, through imprisonment or intimidation, five presidential challengers (four of them his supporters previously) and was re-elected on March 29. Three of the would-be candidates were from the military. One is in prison, one under house arrest, and the third, former Army Chief of Staff Sami Anan, suffered a stroke in prison and is now in critical condition.

Anan's imprisonment was part of a new wave of repression against those who have criticized Sisi. Others arrested during the presidential race or shortly afterward included Strong Egypt Party founder Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, who was accused of terrorism after criticizing Sisi on satellite television and is now suffering dire health consequences due to prolonged solitary confinement under harsh conditions. The campaign has also extended to many young liberals including blogger Wael Abbas, youth activist Shady al-Ghazaly Harb, and human rights defender Amal Fathy. They have joined tens of thousands of other political prisoners, many detained for months or years without charge, or convicted in mass trials.

Recent efforts to eliminate potential rivals and silence independent voices come amid growing signs that Sisi might try to stay in office beyond the end of his second term in 2022. When the Egyptian constitution was rewritten after the 2013 coup, the drafters were still hoping to preserve some gains of the 2011 revolution including constraints on presidential power. The 2014 constitution stipulated that the president is limited to two four-year terms (unlike former President Hosni Mubarak, who served for 30 years). All amendments to the constitution must be approved by a popular referendum as well as parliament, but the drafters added a special provision that articles relating to the re-election of the president may not be amended.

The drafters of the 2014 constitution had reason to worry. During his first term Sisi promised that he would respect the constitution and leave office after a maximum of eight years, but he did not repeat that pledge during his recent campaign for re-election and his supporters have suggested publicly and in parliament that he should stay longer. Sources within the Egyptian parliament now say that there is a process underway to introduce amendments that would remove the provision saying that articles relating to the re-election of the president may not be amended, extend the presidential term from four to six years, and remove term limits, among other changes.

Now Sisi appears to be working on removing any opposition. Independent political parties formed since the 2011 revolution have been systematically undermined by security agencies, and there is now pressure on the 20 or so parties represented in parliament to coalesce into just two or three, all supporting Sisi.

There are also efforts to quell any opposition within the regime. Sisi has replaced many senior security officials—the ministers of defense and interior, army chief of staff, and director of intelligence—in recent months. The parliament also passed on July 16 a law that would grant designated senior

military officers lifelong immunity from prosecution for crimes committed in the years following the 2013 coup. The law gives the president the right to designate the officers enjoying such immunity, a highly effective tool to use in managing any dissent within the military.

Why should the United States, a long-term ally of Egypt that has given more than \$78 billion in assistance, care if Sisi paves the way to remaining president for life? Because if he succeeds, at best it will bring back the stagnation, corruption, and lack of responsiveness to citizens that led to the revolt against Mubarak—but with much more brutal repression. That is a recipe for trouble in this most populous country of the Middle East and neighbor to Israel, which is already fighting a terrorist insurgency in Sinai. And if Sisi tries to secure a lock on the presidency and fails, then the country—lacking any outlets for peaceful expression of opposition in politics, media, or civil society—might soon be headed for violent unrest. Far better for Sisi to allow the re-emergence of free politics and to leave office on time.

There is not much the United States can or should do directly about the internal political situation in Egypt. What the U.S. government, and particularly the Congress, can do is scrutinize engagement with and assistance to Egypt in order to ensure that they promote stability for the nation rather than one-man rule.

My specific recommendations include:

- **Keep conditionality: it's working.** The U.S. administration has become bolder over the past year in using the conditions Congress has legislated to send a clear message: security assistance will be withheld unless the Egyptian government addresses longstanding U.S. concerns including the 2013 conviction of workers for American NGOs, a draconian new NGO law that would crush civil society and impede future assistance, and ongoing dealings with North Korea. These problems have not yet been resolved, but there are positive signs since the suspension of aid. Stay the course. Keep writing conditions into legislation and keep encouraging the administration to use them with confidence.
- **Do a bottom-up review of security assistance and right-size it.** The U.S.-Egyptian security relationship has been on autopilot at \$1.3 billion annually for too long without a rigorous review of whether the size and composition of the assistance suits the Egyptian military's actual challenges. The Congress should also insist on vigorous implementation of end-use monitoring to ensure that equipment provided by U.S. taxpayers is not used to carry out human rights violations, which enflame radicalization and perpetuate terrorism.
- **Support the Egyptian people, not only the military.** Two of the crying needs of Egypt right now are 1) labor force development through education to address rampant youth unemployment and 2) modernization of water infrastructure, particularly in agriculture, to help mitigate an impending shortage. While an overall increase in U.S. assistance seems unlikely, the United States could shift funds from security to these categories.
- **Express support for democracy and rights.** Finally, U.S. officials and members of Congress can express their support, publicly and privately, for democratic procedures and human rights in Egypt. They can cite salutary provisions in the country's constitution such as term limits, and express hope that they will be upheld. Ultimately it is for Egyptian citizens to decide the future they want for their country, and for American citizens and their representatives to decide what support they are willing to provide to secure that future.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.