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On 3 July 2013, Egypt's military ousted president Mohamed Morsi and installed an interim government lasting until then-Minister of Defence Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's assumption of the presidency in August 2014. The role of the secular opposition in what became an even further consolidation of authoritarianism has come under scrutiny. A significant number of secular parties and figures initially supported the military coup d'état and were appointed to the newly formed interim government. Yet nine years after the coup, and despite its early inclusion in the government, the voice of Egypt's secular political opposition was in effect silenced under the authoritarian government of President Sisi. This paper explores the secular opposition's path to its current predilection, and offers insight as to if the future holds any potential for the secular opposition in Egypt to become a viable and effective force in national politics.

In addition to disposing Morsi, the military dissolved the Shura Council, at the time the only standing chamber of the Egyptian parliament. The council's dissolution came one year after the Supreme Constitutional Court's dissolution of the House of Representatives. As these undemocratic measures were being acting, secular leaders were appointed to the interim government, such as Hazem el Beblawi as prime minister and Ziad Bahaa Eldin as deputy prime minister. Most notably, Mohamed ElBaradei was appointed as vice president. As a leading secular and liberal figure in Egyptian politics, ElBaradei's appointment to the vice-presidency was in large part intended to allay the international community's fears of a military takeover. The incorporation of secular leaders into the government indicated substantial secular support of the military coup.

The events of 14 August 2013 would reveal the extent to which the secular opposition condoned human rights abuses and authoritarian practices. On that day, military and state security forces brutally dispersed the pro-Morsi sit-in in Rab'a Square, perpetrating a massacre that left at least 1150 people dead in a matter of only a few hours.<sup>1</sup> Although ElBaradei resigned in protest from the vice presidency the same day, a considerable number of Egyptian secularists continued to either support or turn a blind eye to the excessive force inflicted upon the protesters at Rab'a, a majority of whom were civilians. Secular political figures and parties continued to work in the interim cabinet, and were appointed to the committee that drafted the 2014 constitution, under which Egypt remains governed to this day.

Nine years after the military coup, most of the secular opposition in Egypt has either been marginalised or harshly repressed by the current Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and virtually all political and public spheres have been effectively nationalised. Given these considerations, this paper contemplates the future of the secular opposition in Egyptian politics: Will the secular opposition in Egypt participate in the political process, should any space to do so be opened by the government? Or will secularist political leaders and parties continue to be sidelined, remaining inconsequential actors in national politics?

To explore these questions, this paper will first address what it means to be part of the 'secular opposition' in Egypt. It will then delve into a review of the political behaviour of secular political forces between 2011 and 2019, a period beginning with Egypt's January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution and continuing until the present day. The paper concludes by analysing the future of secular political opposition in Egypt, taking contemporary dynamics into account.

### **Defining the Secular Opposition in Egypt**

In Egypt, identifying as secular is fraught with the risk of ostracisation or marginalisation, in politics and in society. Secularists in Egypt are often mislabelled, finding themselves targeted in no small part due to misconceptions surrounding the term 'secular.' In Egypt and throughout the Arab region, secularism is often confused or conflated with other concepts such as atheism, apostasy, or heresy, causing many secularists to be viewed as infidels or social pariahs. Islamists are known to exploit the negative undertones of secularism for their own political gain; weaponising the term to intimidate or defame their secular opponents. To counter this, secular political actors often utilise alternative terms to define themselves in national political discourse, such as 'civilian,' 'pro-state,' or 'liberal.'

The term 'secular' is used in this paper to refer to any group of politicians or activists, whether organised in registered political parties or in unestablished parties undergoing the registration process. The term 'secular' in this paper also refers to those who are not organised in any political party and do not use religion as the main source of their political legitimacy or discourse, or as a tool of mobilisation. So even if some of these groups and individuals identify as religious, or reference religion, they are considered to be secular as long as religion is not used as a tool of mobilisation and legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

This paper defines the 'secular opposition' as secular groups, parties, or individuals that currently oppose the Egyptian government, even if they had previously supported the government. Accordingly, political parties such as the Dignity Party, the Reform and Development Party, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Egypt Freedom Party, the Justice Party, the Revolutionary Guards Party, the Revolution's Tomorrow Party, the Constitution Party, the Strong Egypt Party, and the Bread and Freedom Party will be analysed by this paper.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to political parties, all activists, public figures or members of civil society organisations that currently oppose the Egyptian government will be included in the category of secular opposition. Examples include the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a civil society organisation, or Hamdeen Sabahi, a leftist politician. Also included under the umbrella of secular opposition are the political parties, movements, and public figures organised in political coalitions, such as the Civil Democratic Movement.

### **Egypt's Secular Opposition: Political Behaviour and Challenges (2011-2019)**

The secular opposition in Egypt received the opportunity of a lifetime with the 25 January 2011 uprising, as many groups shortly thereafter were able to legally institutionalize themselves. Political parties that had tried and failed to officially become licensed under the Mubarak government or parties that newly formed after the uprising came to play an important role in public discourse and political life of the highly populated country.<sup>4</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, newly established political parties emerged in Egypt,

such as the Constitution Party, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Egypt Freedom Party, the Justice Party, the Revolutionary Guards Party, the Revolution Tomorrow's Party, and the Strong Egypt Party.

Political movements and coalitions, such as Kefaya, the April 6 Youth Movement, and the National Association for Change, had relative freedom to engage in politics after years of repression under Mubarak's dictatorship. Long-established NGOs, such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights or newly established NGOs worked on a number of issues, ranging from human rights to overseeing elections, research and policy advising, gender issues, and protecting vulnerable members of society such as street children. NGOs in Egypt numbered at 31,000 after the January 25<sup>th</sup> uprising, and by 2014, that number had climbed to 46,000.<sup>5</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the January 25 uprising, the lack of organisational capacity in many of these secular groups became apparent. Some went through financial crises or internal conflicts, and others kept themselves preoccupied with media campaigns at the expense of rallying supporters behind their political cause. Compounding these issues, the Islamists allied with the interim government under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) against secular political forces, and used religion to malign secularists and scare the public from supporting secularists' political platforms and their 'real' goals.

Given this combination of factors, one can understand why most secular political parties in Egypt did not win enough seats in the People's Assembly elections (2011-2012) and almost no seats in the Shura Council elections (2012). By the time of the Council elections, some of these secular forces had boycotted the political process, calling on Egyptians to return to Tahrir Square instead of going along with the undemocratic government being established by Muslim Brotherhood-led government and its ally at the time, the military. A boycott was seen by many secularists as appropriate, especially as the Islamists had ignored compromise and disregarded the principles and goals of revolution to advance their political interests.

Although many secularists had participated in both the first and second constitutional assemblies, they alleged to have been marginalised in these assemblies. Many of them decided to withdraw from the second constituent assembly in November 2012, as the situation at that time escalated with President Morsi's unilateral constitutional declaration, which led to open clashes between Islamists and secularists and marked the beginning of the end of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

All oppositional secular parties and leaders have endured a progressively worsening crackdown since the July 2013 military coup followed by Sisi's ascension to power. Since the military takeover, the secular opposition has become polarised. On one side of the divide, there are secularists who support the authoritarian government and turn a blind eye to its human rights violations, sometimes even justifying these violations. On the other side are secularists who explicitly oppose the ruling regime. One can observe two primary types of polarisation among the secular movement in the era of authoritarian rule under the military and Sisi. The first is polarisation in regards to the military coup and human rights issues. The second is polarisation over participating in elections.

### ***Polarisation over the Military Coup and Human Rights Issues***

After the 2013 military coup, the secular political opposition in Egypt became polarised, over the legitimacy of the coup itself and over human rights issues. This polarisation dividing secular political forces in Egypt continued in the years that followed. Some secular activists, political parties, and public figures have criticised the human rights record of the Egyptian government and distanced themselves from its anti-democratic policies and practices. Other secularists implicitly or explicitly supported the state and its

authoritarianism, even rallying to justify the human rights abuses and violations that have become increasingly endemic in post-2013 politics.

The polarisation among the secular political movement has had two important ramifications. First, it has led secularism in Egypt to become associated with the support of military rule, rendering secularists as hypocritical and opportunistic in the eyes of the Egyptian public. Second, this polarisation has prevented the secular opposition from unifying its efforts to have an impact on Egyptian politics. Later, as Sisi's rule increasingly consolidated its authoritarianism, secularists on both sides of the divide suffered from repression. Many were jailed or marginalised- including Sisi supporters – by the Sisi government itself.

### ***Polarisation over Participating in Elections***

The secular political opposition in Egypt was also polarised over the issue of engaging in post-2013 elections. Some secular opponents decided to participate in the presidential elections of 2014 and 2018, in addition to the 2015 parliamentary elections and the 2019 national referendum on constitutional amendments. Yet many other secular forces decided to boycott the electoral process, and some boycotted later elections after participating in earlier ones. For instance, the Egyptian Popular Current, a coalition composed of leftist politicians and activists, participated in the 2014 presidential elections, rallying behind candidate Hamdeen Sabahi. Pitted against Sisi, the military establishment's candidate, Sabahi lost the election with less than 4% of the popular vote. Sabahi's crushing electoral loss, coupled with an escalation of repressive policies enacted by the government, led the Current to boycott the parliamentary elections in 2015 and the presidential elections in 2018. Other secular forces also chose to boycott rather than participate in an electoral process widely seen as unfair and rigged. The Civil Democratic Movement, a coalition of secular parties, launched the 'Stay at home' campaign, calling on Egyptian voters to boycott the election, as the results were 'already decided.'<sup>7</sup>

The next year, in what turned out to be yet another escalation of the unprecedented repression under the Sisi government, Hossam Moanes, spokesman of the Egyptian Popular Current and head of Sabahi's presidential campaign in 2014, formed the "Hope Coalition," an alliance of secular political parties, movements, and activists to run in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Moanes was arrested with other secular figures in the coalition, under charges including 'joining a terrorist organization to achieve its goals.'<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding the Sisi government's prosecution of secularists for attempting to lawfully participate in elections, many other secular political forces continued to support the state. By accepting the Sisi government as their puppeteer, these secularists consigned themselves to the margins of Egyptian politics.

### **The Future of Egypt's Secular Opposition**

In order to address the future of the secular opposition in Egypt, we must first analyse the future of Egyptian politics. Thus, the question is posed: Can any political openness be anticipated in the near future of Egyptian politics? To begin contemplating this question, we must first consider the pillars that have enabled the government of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to sustain and even consolidate its authoritarian grip on Egyptian politics over the last six years. In doing so, one can detect three major pillars underlying the resilience of the Egyptian government's authoritarianism: regional and international support, military support, and domestic and international support of the government's so-called war on terrorism.

First, the Egyptian government enjoys significant support from both international and regional actors. Internationally, American support under the Trump administration and the European Union's reluctance to take a tougher position against the Egypt's abysmal human rights record has given the Sisi government significant power. The lack of any consequences or pressure from the international community has emboldened the government to perpetuate repressive policies and practices with increasing frequency and intensity against oppositional groups. Regionally, Egypt is also dependent on a strategic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Egypt's bilateral relations with Israel, which are closer than they've ever been before, also guarantee American support of the Sisi regime.

The second pillar of authoritarianism's resilience in Egypt is the military. The Sisi regime enjoys substantial support from the military, one of the most important institutions in the country. Military support, which is reinforced by the provision of economic and social benefits to high ranking military generals, gives the government a capacity for violence that is difficult to challenge or contest.

Terrorism, considered the major national security threat, is the third major pillar serving to consolidate authoritarian governance in Egypt. It does this by first, keeping a large segment of the Egyptian public fearful of any change that may send the country toward a similar fate as that of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Libya. This fear is inundated into the public consciousness through constant repetition by state propaganda. At the same time, the government's so-called war on terrorism is used by the state to justify its harsh crackdowns on political opponents. This narrative, in which the state is portrayed as the ultimate bulwark against the terrorist threat, not only serves to justify Sisi's draconian policies and practices to the Egyptian public, but it also serves to ensure the support of major western powers, including the United States and the European Union.

Taking into account these three pillars of authoritarian resilience in Egypt, together with the harsh repression exacted upon political opposition over the past years, the demonstrations of September 2019 came as a shock to the government. Lasting for two weeks, the demonstrations forced the Egyptian government to take economic and social measures for the first time, such as re-instituting food subsidies to 1.8 million Egyptians (after they had been previously excluded from the food subsidy program as part of the structural reforms adopted by Egypt as a condition of the 2016 IMF agreement). The demonstrations also, for the first time, led to discussion among pro-regime figures, and even officials from within the regime itself, about the necessity of adopting political reforms allowing a genuine space for political opposition to have a voice in the country's governance.

Despite the legitimacy garnered by the Egyptian government from its so-called war on terrorism, and the support of its military combined with that of its international and regional allies, the government is less stable than it seems on the surface. Currently, there are real divisions within the President Sisi's close circle over the necessity of political reforms, and if needed, over the extent to which these reforms should open the government.<sup>9</sup> If we take into account the continuation of uprisings and regime changes throughout the region, change seems inevitable for the Egyptian government.

So, while no radical reforms in governance are anticipated in the short term or over the next several years, some political openness is expected to be instituted by the government in the coming period. Political openness, should it happen, will occur in one or more of the following three platforms: media, elections, and civil society.

In regards to media, there is likely to be some openness in which oppositional secular figures will be given platforms to express their views. This has already begun happening on political talk shows: for the first time since 2014, Egyptian television anchor Amr Adeeb hosted prominent secular political figures. Given a platform on his show were Mohamed Ghoniem, a secular oppositional figure and former supporter

of the Sisi regime, and Osama El-Ghazali Harb, a leading member of the Free Egyptian Party and former head of a committee formed by President Sisi to review the cases of youth imprisoned for political reasons.

The second platform likely to have a degree of openness or reform enacted is the parliamentary and local elections, expected to occur in 2020-21. The government may open 10 to 20% of seats for genuine competition in addition to allowing some room for political parties to work independently.<sup>10</sup>

And finally, civil society is the third platform likely to see some openness in the coming period. Civil society organisations - that at the present time have no protected space at all in which to conduct their work - may be given limited space or freedom in the near future. This openness would likely not include flexibility with foreign funding, as the Egyptian government has no intention of reforming the draconian 2016 law on civic associations. Yet it may include the release of a limited number of political activists, especially those with well-known names.

### **Assessing Oppositional Secular Engagement Should Political Openness Occur**

Since 2013, the secular opposition in Egypt has been polarised over the question of whether or not it should participate in elections or dialogue with the government, should there be an opening to do so. Since July 2013, and despite strong resistance against participating in elections considered rigged or administered unfairly by the government, many members of the secular opposition opted to participate. They engaged in the electoral process even though they likely understood that this engagement would not greatly alter the unjust political system.

Pro-boycott secular groups and individuals claim that electoral participation, or any engagement or dialogue with the regime, is implicit support of the current authoritarian political system. Participating in elections, they contend, will further enable the regime to legitimise its authoritarian policies and practices to the Egyptian public and the international community.

In response, pro-participation secularists point out that the Sisi government enjoys both domestic and international legitimacy regardless of whether the opposition participates in elections or not. Although running in elections would not likely change the current authoritarian policies, these secularists contend, it would at least keep a minimum connection between the opposition and its constituencies.

Moreover, the electoral process would function as a space for the opposition to practice and develop organisational and practical skills, even if such practice and development would not be reflected in political outcomes. Should any more far-reaching reform occur in the future, these skills could be capitalised upon. And thus, we arrive at the fundamental predicament discovered by most of the secular opposition upon Mubarak's ouster in 2011: They are significantly lacking in skills, and there is a huge gap between them and their constituencies.

In an academic roundtable organised by the Middle East Studies Association, where I presented a paper on social movement mobilisation in Egypt, several Egyptian secular scholars made their case against secular political participation. When secularists participate in elections or dialogue with the government, it neither has impact on the state's legitimacy nor does it have impact on Egyptian politics. In all elections in which secular opponents participated (the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections, the 2015 parliamentary elections, and the 2019 referendum on the constitutional amendments), secular opponents' participation had no impact on the government and its policies, and made no difference in political outcomes. It rendered secular opponents as mere 'losers' with no popularity, incapable of acting as an alternative to the regime.

The above contentions are valid, yet the counterargument is valid as well: even if boycotting elections has no impact on the regime, and even if secular opponents have no capacity at the present time to change the reality of authoritarianism in Egypt, participating in political processes is still a valuable and important endeavour. As noted above, political engagement maintains the connection between secular politicians and the public, and it aids in the accumulation of skills that will be needed should authoritarianism in Egypt be overcome.

One critical question remains, however: Should there be any radical change in Egypt's political system, will the participation of secular opponents in the current authoritarian system damage their integrity in the eyes of the Egyptian public? Although there is no simple answer to this question, if we observe recent history - during the time of Mubarak or even more recently during the reign of Sisi, we can see that this assumption (that political participation will harm the integrity of secularists in the eyes of the citizenry) is a concern largely confined to the realm of academia. In the streets, Egyptians are less concerned about issues of integrity than they are about pragmatic considerations. Their votes, and their support or opposition to political actors, is the result of short-term calculations in regards to their social and economic needs.

Secular political parties, such as the Al-Wafd Party and Free Egyptians Party, have supported the ruling regime, even supporting or turning a blind eye to human rights violations and abuses. Yet they still gained votes in the 2015 parliamentary elections (the Free Egyptians Party won nearly 11% of the seats in the current House of Representatives, receiving the most votes in comparison to all other political parties that had run in the election). The Egyptian upper and middle classes, Copts, and owners or employees of small businesses constitute a considerable proportion of the voting power in Egypt, and they are pragmatic and less ideological than what may be assumed by scholars. The Egyptian lower class or poor are driven by pragmatic considerations as well. They are mainly concerned with economic and social benefits, and ready to vote for whomever they think will deliver policies providing these benefits, regardless of ethical or ideological considerations.

While this paper supports the participation of the secular opposition in Egyptian politics should there be any opening to do so over the next two years, it also asserts that secular political participation should be determined by three broad considerations: maintaining a well-defined secularist discourse, a re-prioritisation of policies and demands, and allying with similar secular parties and movements.

First, while political participation is important, the political discourse that accompanies this participation is just as important. In other words, while oppositional political participation at any level (elections, dialogue, media, etc.) is important, there should be a very well-defined political discourse accompanying this participation. This discourse must not abdicate the basic tenets of secularism, such as the civil nature of the state, the separation between religion and the state, and respect for human rights. Participation, even though it results in co-optation by the regime, is essential because it establishes the secular opposition as an inseparable part of the political process. Thus, even if the secular political opposition cannot set itself apart from the authoritarian government in terms of policy, it can at least maintain a discourse expressing the basic values of secularists in Egypt. Doing so is very important, and should not be compromised or given up for any political gains whatsoever.

The second consideration that should determine secularist political participation is the re-prioritisation of their policies and political demands. The top priority should be given to economic and social policies. Doing so will help secular opponents; first, by increasing their popularity, allowing them to overcome the traditional barriers that have stood between them and the Egyptian public. The second priority should be the re-negotiation of the entire political system in terms of the laws and procedures needed to enhance the credibility of parliamentary, local, and presidential elections. This will enhance the rules of the political

game through a low-risk strategy as opposed to a high-risk strategy, such as, for instance, challenging the legitimacy of the regime.

Third, strategically and organisationally, secular parties and politicians are recommended to work closely in alliance (political or electoral) with similar secular parties and groups even if the latter are pro-regime; this is preferable to allying with the regime itself. For instance, allying with the Free Egyptian Party or Al Wafd Party, despite their support of the regime, is more effective than allying with Salafists or the state puppet-parties. Alliances or coalitions with the latter are likely to undermine the integrity and basic political norms of secular actors in Egypt.

Both the Free Egyptian Party and Al Wafd Party have kept a little distance between them and the Sisi government. Yet at the same time, they have developed their organisational structures, which will benefit the secular opposition in Egypt should there be any degree of political openness or reform in the future. Moreover, restructuring the organisation should be another priority of secular groups in preparation for any coming reform or political opening. Internal bylaws and the manifestos of these parties should be rewritten. In addition, there should be a permanent structure for internal elections, and research units should be developed to formulate alternative public policies. For Egypt's secular political opposition to become a viable and effective force in Egyptian politics, these processes of internal reform and reorganisation must be implemented in the very near future.

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## About the Author

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2018) 'All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt' 12 August, accessed 22 October 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Qandeel, Amany (2014). 'Altahawalat Albonyawyea Wa'AlWazefyeya: Al Mogtma' Almadany ba'd Althwarat Fi Masr 2-2' [Structural and Institutional Changes: Post-Revolution Civil Society in Egypt 2-2], 30 December, Egyptian Center for Research and Studies, accessed on 19 October 2019, <http://www.acrseg.org/32498>.

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<sup>9</sup>Skype Interview in October 2019.

<sup>10</sup>Skype Interview in October 2019.