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Abdel-Fattah Mady and Robert Springborg's edited volume, bringing together contributions from eleven leading Egyptian and international scholars of Egypt, makes for sobering reading. There is a common theme running through many of the contributions of a worrying gap between the high stated aspirations for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's 'new republic' and the lack of tangible improvements in the lives of the great majority of Egyptians. More worryingly still, Sisi's highly centralised and personalised form of governance militates against the development of robust, independent state institutions or political parties that could participate in political and economic decision making. Looming over all of this is a government spending far beyond its means, often on mega-projects of high expense and dubious utility, and on weapons purchases far in excess of other countries of a similar economic level, 'a rentier state without rents,' as Springborg puts it in his punchy chapter on the under-delivering economy. As Egypt takes on more and more debt, or sells off state assets, becoming increasingly dependent on aid from wealthy Gulf States, the United States and the European Union, a future of deepening dependency and even loss of sovereignty beckons.

The chapters describe how Egypt has reached this low point in its political and economic fortunes. But despite the apparent tensions and contradictions, the authors conclude that the regime appears not to be at risk of imminent collapse, and is even stable if not exactly sustainable indefinitely. Over twelve years have now passed since Sisi's coup and he was elected President in 2014, indicating a certain solidity to his rule.

Unsurprisingly, most of the chapters investigate how the Sisi regime pulls off this conjuring trick. What the Sisi regime is good at is transforming its very real liabilities into - if not assets - then factors that enable it to remain in power. Mohammad Affan and Bruce K. Rutherford describe how the regime has been able to build 'legitimacy without performance.' By 'exaggerating its achievements, concealing its failures, and suppressing alternatives' the regime is able to propagate a narrative of achievement that may not align with reality but which nevertheless is effective in maintaining sufficient domestic and international support. The notion that the Sisi regime is 'more effective than any viable alternative' has been strengthened by the state propaganda narrative asserting that Sisi has saved the country from the turmoil of the post 2011 period, especially from threats such as terrorism and the Muslim Brotherhood backed government of Mohamed Morsi. This propaganda is abetted by a bleak reality of mounting disorder and cataclysmic violence on Egypt's borders with Gaza and Sudan, and chronic instability in Libya. In such alarming times, people look to a strong leader to protect them; Sisi never tires of telling the Egyptian people that he is that leader. Sisi's hard power repression, exercised through the removal of his political opponents and the crushing of dissent, with many thousands of casualties in Raba'a and elsewhere, prepared the ground for his enduring authoritarian rule by demonstrating the high cost of resistance.

A third factor - in what Springborg describes as 'Sisi's Fateful Triangle' in the concluding chapter of the book - is external support, which coagulates triangularly with hard and soft power in a mutually reinforcing manner and is used by the regime to sustain itself in power. Sisi's appeal to his international backers is based on very much the same principles as his claims to legitimacy with the Egyptian people. He does not need enthusiastic approbation; all he needs is acquiescence to the assertion that he is better than other available alternatives.

As Springborg explains in his chapter on the economy, Egypt continues to be the recipient of loans from the International Monetary Fund, despite being second most indebted country to the institution, after Argentina, and despite repeatedly failing to comply with conditions for economic reform that the fund has tried to attach. The European Union came forward with a Macro-Economic Assistance Package of billions of euros to stabilise Egypt's economy despite scant evidence that the government had the intention or the capacity to make necessary reforms.

May Darwich's chapter describes Sisi's foreign policy as another catalogue of failure, dressed up in a discourse of illusory progress and success. Darwich rather euphemistically calls this 'dissonance between discourse and policies,' which in practice amounts to a series of false claims. Nevertheless, Egypt's international supporters willingly go along with these falsehoods because in international relations terms the Sisi regime seems better than other available alternatives. Darwich's chapter is a jarring reminder, even for those familiar with the history, of the long record of foreign policy failures by successive Egyptian governments since 1956: under Nasser, the short-lived unification with Syria, the war in Yemen, the disastrous 1967 war with Israel; under Sadat, Camp David's failure to satisfy the rights of the Palestinians, leaving Egypt facing opprobrium from its Arab neighbours and stoking division at home; under Mubarak, in seeking to become a

useful bridge between the West and the Middle East, Egypt's dependency on the United States and even Israel became more entrenched.

Sisi came to power pledging to build a relationship of partnership, not dependency, with the West, and made vainglorious claims about establishing an Arab joint force to counter the threat of collapsing central governments in the post 2011 Arab region. This initiative has been disregarded by other Arab states while Egypt has become 'subservient to Emirati and Saudi leanings.' Sisi's foreign policy failures over the Ethiopian Dam, the islands of Tiran and Sanafir ceded to Saudi Arabia, and the burgeoning catastrophe of Gaza all point to continuity in Egypt's foreign policy under Sisi with the decline of regional power that marked his predecessors' records. Darwich points out that the government's 'complicity and acquiescence to Israeli and US policies' has widened the gap between public opinion and regime policies. Egypt's accommodation of, or subservience to, supporters on which it is increasingly dependent may ingratiate itself to them while securing sustained financial, political and other support, but at the risk of eroding its domestic legitimacy.

Another area of regime policy that exhibits continuity with its predecessors is human rights. In his chapter, 'Cross-Border Human Rights Activism' Moataz El Fegiery describes how 'the global human rights system has provided space for resisting authoritarianism in Egypt.' This is true, but it also reflects the darker reality that extreme repression directed against human rights activists in Egypt has forced scores of leading activists to leave the country to avoid persecution. Several leading Egyptian human rights organisations now have an involuntary transnational character with staff members working both inside and outside of the country. Writing twenty years ago on the application of the spiral model theory of human rights socialisation to Egypt, I observed that Egypt 'stands as a caution to the optimistic implications of the spiral model theory.'[1] As El Fegiery explains, Egyptian human rights activists can 'challenge the government's narrative,' but have had little success in changing its human rights practices. Two decades ago, Egypt was already skilled at making 'tactical concessions' in the language of the spiral model theory, but those concessions make little or no difference to human rights conditions on the ground. Sisi has continued and even elaborated on these practices with such high profile but empty initiatives as the National Human Rights Strategy and the National Dialogue.

Egypt has been a global trend-setter in deflecting criticisms of its human rights record. It was a pioneer in using civil society registration requirements as a mechanism of control and in identifying dependency on foreign funding as a key vulnerability to be exploited. It has normalised the labelling of its peaceful critics as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. These diversionary tactics are effective because key audiences value maintaining close, cooperative relations with Egypt over human rights concerns. As long as states are willing to engage disingenuously on issues like human rights conditions or the economy or other areas of legitimate concern, there will be no meaningful incentive for the Egyptian government to undertake necessary reforms.

The editors and contributors have done an admirable job in compiling a volume that tells a coherent story of Sisi's consolidation of his rule through the creation of a police state in which 'state actors deploy violence against citizens with regularity and impunity,' while presiding over

an accelerating economic crisis, successive foreign policy failures, and the erosion of state social provision that was the backbone of the first decades of the independent Egyptian state. Despite these apparent contradictions, Sisi's regime shows no sign of failing and appears stable because key external supporters in the Gulf and in the West are prepared to accept Sisi, with all his mismanagement and non-achievement, as better than the available alternatives. Sisi's hard power repression and suffocation of the political system ensures that alternatives do not emerge from within Egypt. For the time being, as long as the elements of the 'fateful triangle' hold up, Egyptians are trapped in a dysfunctional system that delivers little to improve their quality of life. Sisi and the regime can control their use of hard power, and they have shown that they are prepared to use it ruthlessly; they are also adept at weaving narratives that maintain a level support, partly through fear of what the regime can do to you, and also of what might happen if the regime was not there to protect you. They also deploy a discourse of restoring national greatness that may have little substance, but to which people are willing to attach or at least inure themselves. Sisi cannot control what his international backers might do, and with a mercurial president in office in Washington threatening, for example, to forcibly transfer millions of Palestinians into Egypt, this uncertainty is perhaps where the regime will face the most imminent threats.

About the Author

Neil Hicks is the Senior Director for Advocacy at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS).

[1] Neil Hicks, "Transnational Human Rights Networks and Human Rights in Egypt" in Anthony Chase and Amr Hamzawy eds. *Human Rights in the Arab World, Independent Voices,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.