

Understanding the Praetorian Rule of Fatah al-Sisi in Egypt

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Abstract

Gamal Abdel Nasser established the praetorian regime in 1952. Nasser ruled Egypt with the 'party-state' system to maintain the 'social contract' between the state and the Egyptians. The government thrived on the patrimonial relationship and de-politicization of the population. The 'Egyptian upheaval' in 2011 sought the protection of individuals' rights, equality, and freedom against the military-led praetorian regime. A short-democratic experiment led to the arrival of Islamist majority rule in Egypt under the leadership of President Mohammed Morsi. The liberal-secular oppositions and the military removed President Morsi because Islamists failed to achieve the protesters' aspirations. Egyptians supported the military's rule that led to the election of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as President of Egypt. Fatah al-Sisi shifted the dynamics of government from 'party-state' to 'ruler-arbiter' praetorian rule that centralized the authority and power under his leadership through military domination to counter the Islamists and revolutionary aspirations. The research explains the causality behind the Egyptian military's intervention in politics, structuring of the praetorian regime in Egypt; the return of military praetorianism after the removal of President Hosni Mubarak; the rise of the Sisi as 'ruler-arbiter' and its implications on the democratization process. The paper's method is explanatory to study the 'structural' (military) and 'agential' (Sisi's rule) factors to determine the causes of establishing the praetorian 'ruler-arbiter' type Sisi's regime. The approach to examine the ruler-arbiter phenomenon is the 'actor-centric' instead of the 'mechanistic' to understand the praetorian rule in Egypt. The research finds that the rise of the 'ruler-arbiter' regime under the leadership of the Sisi, caused by the military-established praetorian authority and President Sisi's choices and decisions, led to the failure of the democratization in Egypt.

Keywords: *Military, Democratic Transition, Egyptian Revolt, Social Contract, Authoritarianism*

Introduction

A political system with a low level of political institutionalization and an extreme level of political engagement is called the 'praetorian system' in politics (Dobel, 1978, p.966).² A well-established praetorian state gets a license to use violent means, creates more social and political inequalities, destroys the peace, circumvents the justice delivery system, and divides society (Sabine, 1937, p.343). The praetorian rule, thus, is naturally an authoritarian state that survives on the suppression of the violent and non-violent opponents through its most potent institution

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² The Greek philosophers explained that "the system supported by 'wronged' or 'perverted' constitutions (Aristotle, 2010, p.112). The political decay results in praetorian societies which are without civic culture. Hence, the state is characterized by force, wealth, numbers, and charisma, aptly termed by Machiavelli, a 'corrupt state' (Dobel, 1978, p.966).

called the military. The military in a praetorian state is one of the most critical institutions because such a state enjoys little popular legitimacy (Barany, 2012, p.4).

As a distinct variety of authoritarian political systems, a praetorian state dominates all public spaces and subordinates any competing space that civil society institutions could occupy. The military controlled the state's apparatuses because it converted its generals and co-opted civilian leaders to become part of the 'bureaucratic state' and a considerable force in making the middle class based on patrimonial alliances. It indicates the military's embeddedness in the organizational assembly and the domineering authorities over the state (El Fadl, 2015, p.264). Following the military intervention in politics, officers establish a praetorian rule based on their involvement in the political system. For instance, the 'arbiter regime' imposes a fixed time limit on the military power to make a tacit agreement for the civilian government. It, however, never relinquishes political influence with the excuse that the military will play the role of the 'guardian' of the civilian government to maintain political order. The preponderance of praetorian rule is based on the de-politicization of the society to hunt its personal goals. It means that army generals control all political power because they fear losing their illegal control over the state to legitimate democratic oppositions. Consequently, they diminished citizenship and curbed political identities to abolish the independent political spaces. Thus, the praetorian rulers consider the prolonged absence of 'imaginary' antagonism as evidence of 'social peace' among the conflicting classes and tacit consensus for their policies (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 2013, p.55).

The praetorian regime reduces the political system to a state-party system. In an authoritarian structure, the military 'strongman' becomes the ruler who determines the country's political trajectory. The ruler concentrates all power in his hands prefers the country over the citizens. The perpetual stronghold over the country helped the 'strongman' to appropriate economic, political, and social powers to establish the 'military society.' The military rule is for the projection to the outside world, but inside, a military 'strongman' led 'ruler-arbiter' praetorian regime plays the leading role in a country. The strongman politics becomes the cornerstone of the praetorian rule. The ruler defines the rules of the political game and emasculates the opponents from garnering political power. The result is that a robust ruler-arbiter regime consolidates the praetorian ruling establishment. The survival of the ruler-arbiter regime depends on the permanent fracturing of the political system in weaker segments through matrimonial alliances.

Conceptual Framework

The study aims to examine the phenomenon of ‘praetorian’ rule in the context of Sisi's regime in Egypt. In identifying two sets of factors: structural (military) and agential (Sisi's rule), it seeks to explain the extent to which the latter, what Samuel Huntington (1991) calls the ‘causer,’ was responsible for the rise of the praetorian regime since Sisi became President. The study follows the ‘actor-centered approach, which, according to Adam Przeworski (2004), has been a reaction to the ‘mechanistic approach of the new transition process in which individual agency did not get the explanatory weight. It further argued that the leadership skills and the strategic choices could determine the outcome of the transition to democracy, otherwise bounded by what Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986, p.19) call ‘structural indeterminacy.’ Therefore, the focus is on the functional saliency of structural factors such as the praetorian rule, societal development that produces the crony capitalism, absence of autonomous entrepreneurial class formation, and economic marginalization of large sections of the population that remained non-conducive for the ‘democratic transition’ in Egypt. The actor or political agency is affected by the ‘balance of power,’ underplayed by social and political forces (Mahoney, 2001, p.131). Given the structural constraints for political actors in the transition period, much depends on their choices, strategies, policy decisions, and style of functioning to utilize the opportunity constructively in an environment that delimits the range of possible actions. In other words, ‘democratic transition’ is a ‘political game’ in which rule is played by ‘wise’ political actors who know what, when, and how to act (Mainwaring, 1989, p.33).

After all, as argued by James Mahoney and Richard Snyder (1999, p.13), “Political actors operate in an environment that delimits the range of possible actions resultant in determining the political outcome.” It means that the social conditions or political structures are not the ultimate causal factor; political agents depending on leadership skills can significantly make a democratic transition. It has much to do with what Huntington (1991, p.106) calls ‘causers’ of democracy which corresponds to actors and agents factors.

The Free Officers Movement established the ‘praetorian’ regime in Egypt after toppling the constitutional monarchy in 1952. The low level of political institutionalization, lack of sustained support for political structures, and weak and ineffective political parties pushed the country toward praetorian rule. The new military-led regime followed the ‘ruler’ type model based on a

'party-state' or 'one-party' system, typical of Amos Perlmutter (1974), designated as a praetorian state. The 'party state' is a dominant political system in non-democratic regimes with elite recruitment, candidate nomination, and electoral mobilization (Gunther and Diamond, 2001, p.8). Thus, authorities give less space to opposition parties in the praetorian setup, resulting in elections having no consequences (Hicken & Kuhonta, 2014, p.333). The ruling party flourishes to help the autocratic regime in peaceful succession and manage intra-elite conflicts (Hackenesch, 2018, p.33).

The military remained in perpetual motion during the rule of Sadat and Mubarak because of its entrenched control over Egyptian society and government institutions. A partial political and economic liberalization was allowed under the *Infitah* policy due to the pressure from internal and external political and economic dynamics. Nevertheless, the praetorian structure of the Egyptian state dominated by the military remained the epicenter of power. Therefore, the resultant structural changes in partial liberalization and military intervention in politics during the Mubarak regime failed to maintain Nasser's 'social contract' between the praetorian authority and Egyptians.

Subsequently, after a short democratic experiment during Arab Spring, the military under the leadership of Fatah al-Sisi returned to power. It established a 'ruler-arbiter' type praetorian regime. There was the maximization of the military rule that completed the direct and permanent military control. Sisi projected himself as a 'divinely' ordained leader and sole savior to achieve total control over Egypt to prevent state collapse. The result was that the Sisi-led military regime weakened the constitution, controlled the top brass of the judiciary, amassed the power, and inflicted a brutal crackdown on the Islamists and other oppositions. The government had the unlimited authority to intervene in politics in the name of the 'protection of constitution and democracy' and 'safeguarding the basic components of the state.' Through military domination, Sisi made the 'protection of regime' equivalent to the 'Strong Egypt' and 'Egypt First'. The style of functioning of Sisi was arbitrary by nature that shaped the 'ruler-arbiter' type regime. It focused on the 'agential' factor that prefers the 'agent' over the 'structure' to determine the political transition. As an 'agent,' Sisi instrumentalized the military as a 'structure' to fracture the oppositions, controlled the economic resources, and military officers dominated the government and other institutions. The result of the 'actor-centered' politics of Egypt diminished

the nascent mushrooming of multi-party politics. It subverted the ‘civil associations’ that remained substantially dormant before the Egyptian revolt of 2011. Consequently, the ‘ruler-arbiter’ leadership of Sisi fits into the category of ‘agential’ factor that determined the ‘structural’ dominance of the military in post-Mubarak politics.

The paper’s objectives: (i) to explain military intervention in the politics of the Arab world. (ii) Structuring of the praetorian rule in Egypt to explain the party-state system. (iii) How the praetorian regime controls and manages the economic resources of the state. (iv) The implications of the return of military praetorianism in post-Mubarak Egypt. (v) The rise of Fatah al-Sisi as the ruler-arbiter in post-Arab Spring Egypt. (vi) And the last section will conclude the findings of the paper.

Research Methodology

The research focused on the explanatory method. The research objectives so derived will be tested with systematically and carefully selected data. Much of the available literature related to the 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath provides valuable insights into the factors accounting for the overthrow of three decades of the authoritarian rule of Hosni Mubarak and the structural domination of the military in the post-Mubarak Egyptian politics. However, the ‘agential’ factor did not get much attention that determines the ‘ruler-arbiter’ type praetorian rule of Sisi in the country. The paper focuses on the decisions and choices made by Sisi for deciding the outcome of the transitional process. In this way, the study aims at bridging the gap between the structural ‘causes’ on the one hand and the agential ‘causer’ on the other hand, which corresponds to actors and agential (agency-centered) factors. A combination of both would provide a holistic approach to understand the phenomenon of the ‘praetorian’ rule of Sisi in the case of post-Mubarak Egypt. The approach to examine the ruler-arbiter phenomenon is the ‘actor-centric’ as opposed to the ‘mechanistic’ to understand the praetorian rule in Egypt.

The study relied upon both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were the translated constitutions of 2012 and 2014 of Egypt, speeches of the Fatah al-Sisi, and Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies Annual Reports, Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies Annual Report, Human Rights Watch Reports, and Freedom House Reports. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, newspapers, unpublished research documents, and other relevant materials published in media from time to time.

Results and Discussion

Explaining the Military's Intervention in Politics in the Arab World

In comparative politics literature, the military in politics is considered a highly contested subject. While some scholars believe it is a positive development contributing to modernization in the newly independent states, others treat it as a significant roadblock in democratic transition. Even in several cases of a new democracy, according to Huntington (1995, p.10), "The removal of authoritarian controls has heightened the communal, ethnic and political tensions; hence, people find stability in militaries." There is, however, a broad agreement among scholars over the interplay of two sets of 'pull' and 'push' factors that account for the military intervention in the political system. The former concerns the military organization's strict professional discipline, arms, and regimentation. Besides, it has a close identification of the military with national interests and prestige. The army met with its interests with the intervention in the corporate sector. The latter includes the structural factors ranging from poor governance, lack of legitimacy, low political culture, ineffective institutions, economic under-development, and absence of consensus regarding the game's rules. The interplay of the 'pull' and 'push' factors establishes the military as the most robust institution of the country to dominate politics.

As Huntington (1985, p.86) has pointed out, two conditions maximize the military's intervention in politics: first, relative supremacy of military officers' power over the civilian political groups within the society. Second, ideologically, professional military ethics is more superior to prevailing political ideologies in society. Likewise, Samuel E. Finer (1988, p.89) maintained, "The propensity of the military to intervene in politics depends primarily on the type of political culture in society and its military institutions."

In any case, the development of military intervention results in two conflicting views. First, armed forces and allies claim that the military as 'guardians' of the republic protected their countries from descending into anarchy. Second, the left and human rights organizations blamed the military for destroying the democratic system to perpetuate their control over the state. Both the narratives became egoistic and adamant about changing their versions because of their own political experiences (Wright, 2007, p.182).

The decolonization process produced the exceptional elasticity of the republics of the Arab world due to their capacity to project themselves as the only stable alternative to instability. This self-

explanatory narrative perfectly fitted the well-entrenched prejudices about the ‘oriental despotism’ in the strategic relationship with Western allies and other outside partners. It seasoned with a paradoxical anti-Islamist rhetoric: full-fledged dictatorship, or at least authoritarian regimes, was supposed to be the only antidote to an overwhelmingly popular Islamism that would inevitably win any electoral contest (Filiu, 2011, p.73). Against this backdrop, the robust capabilities of the military as an institution to remove the monarchy and its ability to protect its core interests reduced the prospects for the independent political parties and civic associations to survive (Vincent, 2013, p.3). The regime’s survival tactics depend on the capacity of the state to defeat the rising opposition.

Willian Zartman (1993, p.241) argues that “there are several apparatuses of state's forte such as stability, security, capacity, accountability, autonomy, and legitimacy that shape its survival strategy in the Arab World.” Further, Joel Migdal (1998, p.19) focused on the “capabilities of states to change in society through state policies, actions, planning, and implementation.” Whereas Francis Fukuyama (2004, p.22) argued that the “regime's capacity is the potentiality to frame and execute policies to enforce laws.” Similarly, Lisa Anderson (1987, p.2) explained that “those states in which modern administrative constructions are robustly framed and steady are termed strong while supervisions are neither capable nor strong which are incapable of reaching to the population and provide resources through patrimonial alliances are weak.” Nevertheless, the decaying of any state’s potential components weakens the state's control over the country. Traditionally, the military in the Arab world is devoted to controlling the state to protect its legitimacy. The capability of military regimes is visible as it successfully appoints 'officers' to the institutions of the state. The civilian-decision-making bodies such as the legislature, executive and judiciary, political parties, and even several non-state actors are influenced by military regimes. It has an authoritarian tendency while reacting to the political or social conditions laden with repression rather than dialogue. The military power generates its ‘longevity’ from the suppression of the opposition. Besides, legitimacy is both a principle of authority and the orientation toward securing electoral support (Perlmutter, 2014, p.13). Thus, in the praetorian state, the possibility of a peaceful transition to democracy is relatively limited and

likely to remain a 'liberalized autocracy.'³ at best to cope with external or internal pressure for systemic change.

Military as an institution does not contribute directly to the improvement of the economy. The military benefitted from controlling the state's resources, produced tremendous military progress, and increased the state machinery and police, making the state stable. The officers entered the ministries, administration, public and private enterprises. They participated in managerial expertise and professional training to increase the military's control over the state's institutions, producing a complex and incompetent bureaucracy. Thus, the military stability faced several problems: declining political legitimacy, increasing social discontent, no consensus over the leadership succession, economic dependence on 'rentier' resources, and external aid that increase the dependency of the fiscal policy on the volatility of international political and economic situations. Thus, it is very likely that in the future, the military regime will deal with serious challenges ranging from the demands of the economic reforms to the removal of the authoritarian leadership.

Consequently, a robust security establishment thrived on a substantial percentage of their Gross National Product (GNP). However, in reality, such spending aims to make the security establishment loyal to the regime to be used as a weapon to intimidate the domestic challenges. As a result, the rules have shown a remarkable propensity by creating multiple security establishments to maintain a vital check and balance (Springborg, 1989, p.97). A solid and repressive *Mukhabarat* state delimits the endurance of authoritarianism. Thus, the Middle East and North Africa region witnesses the durability of autocracy because it relies on repression to maintain the red line in society (Brownlee, 2002, pp.6-14; Kienle, 2001; King, 2003). However, the strategy stabilized the regime for the short term and a continuous rise in expenditure (Bellin, 2004, p.145). External aid becomes the principal lifeline for authoritarian regimes to maximize the logistics and weapons to gain stability. In this sense, the European countries, Russia, China, and the US have played a significant role in strengthening the Arab world's authoritarian regimes. It explains how the coercive apparatus of the establishment has enabled the ruler to

³ The "liberalized autocracy" is a combination of authoritarian and liberalism; elections are usually a 'managed' affair (Brumberg, 2002).

frustrate any chance of democratization, thus, scuttling any hope of even partial political opening. In reverse, military rule thrives in the region.

Structuring the Praetorian Rule in Egypt

President Gamal Abdel Nasser utilized the weak political institutionalization to dismantle the networks of the old *latifundia* class⁴ Nasser enforced the military's control over the parliament, executive, and judicial branches of the government, business bourgeoisie, the intrusive monarchy, and the interference of colonial Britain. Besides, the 'social contract' established the patrimonial network in the education, media, syndicates, labor unions, rural institutions, and religious institutions. Patrimonialism was the basis for the economic redistribution that had two implications. First, it institutionalized the patron-client relationship. Second, it denied the liberalization of the political system. The lack of an independent political culture helped Nasser monopolize 'legitimate' political activity in Egypt (Gorman, 2006, p.112). The military controlled the state's authority to facilitate the nationalization of the economy and the secularization of the society (Halpern, 1963, p.3). The army became the most organized and unified national standard-bearer institution, while the rest remained negligent and unproductive (Perlmutter, 1974, p.60). Thus, the military's domination over the middle classes created power disequilibrium in Egypt, tilted towards the military (El Fadl, 2013, p.306).

President Anwar Sadat introduced partial liberalization in the economic and political sectors under the 'corrective revolution' banner in 1971. Sadat launched the multi-party system to create a plethora of political parties that outwardly looked 'liberal' and multifarious in terms of political leaning. Inwardly, it meant for the pre-emption of any political threat to Sadat's political authority. The result was the formation of several political parties (Arab Socialist Rally (ASR), the Liberal Socialists, and National Progressive Unionists (Tagammu)), including Sadat's National Democratic Party (NDP). It means that the possibility for transition through the ballot box remained bleak (Brumberg, 2002, p.58). Egypt, therefore, was termed as 'liberalized autocracy' that faced the constant threat of broad-based mobilization under the Islamist organization against the regime. Thus, the military-led state's inherent contradiction or structural

⁴ An absentee old-landowning class provided the tremendous military scope to intervene in politics regularly (Mohapatra, 2008, p.285).

ambiguity creates an unstable political equilibrium that eventually leads to full-fledged repression or transition to democracy (Przeworski, 1991).

The assassination of Sadat by radical Islamists created a power vacuum, filled by the referendum that voted Hosni Mubarak to become President of Egypt in 1981. Mubarak co-opted Defense Minister Field Marshal Abdel Halim Abu Ghazala, who later became the deputy Prime Minister in 1982 (Tartter, 1991, p.305).⁵ He also kept Field Marshal Muhammad Husayn Tantawi commander of the military (Springborg, 1989, p.98).⁶ Therefore, the military suffered from 'rank disequilibrium, a 'psychological dissonance' that blowout among members of an organization whose place became at odds with their novel responsibilities. The military turned into a garrison army, and *Mukhabarat* and the police controlled the state (Karawan, 2004, p.25).

At the organizational level, *Mukhabarat* is a 'power triumvirate,' comprising of General Investigation Directorate (GID)/State Security Investigations Services (SSIS)/Homeland Security, Office of the President for Information and Military Intelligence Department (MID). A mighty pyramid of complex intelligence and security establishment became the backbone of Egypt's new political order (Vatikiotis, 1978, p.164-65). President Mubarak was the head of the Supreme Council of the Police (SCP) (Brumberg & Sallam, 2011, p.6). Mubarak unleashed the police-led war against citizens to destroy the crumbling Nasser's era 'social contract.' The police torture moved beyond the frequent practices to a standard behavior to target citizens rather than the activists to extract the confessions. The method of repression sharpened when the Ministry of Interior (MoI) officials hired petty criminals to intimidate and shove opponents (Mann, 1986, p.173).⁷ The US State Department's 2006 Human Rights report exposed that there was a "culture of impunity in the security sector; citizens had become a practically fair game" (Cordesman, 2006, p.192).

⁵ Under Ghazala, the military's growing involvement in Egypt's industrial, defense, and agriculture sectors offset the military's diminishing role in politics.

⁶ A 'controlled' system was engineered by Mubarak, based on the appropriation of financial rewards and a post-retirement career for officers who remained loyal to the regime (Kamrava, 2000, p.16).

⁷ The new technologies enhanced security agencies power, as has been put by Michael Mann that "technological advancement enables the generation of new state structures" (Mann, 1986, p.173).

Mubarak offered a degree of liberalization and controlled democratization that allowed opposition parties banned under Sadat to rejoin the political arena. Besides, the regime continued with the emergency law to suppress the Islamists and genuine oppositions (Hosseinioun, 2015, p.58).⁸ The party activity during Mubarak consisted of issuing a weekly or monthly publication. Only during elections, parties used to conduct rallies and meetings. It was a clear sign of the absence of democratic culture (Sivan, 2000, p.71). The electoral system became the regime's instrument to promote, co-opt new elites, and appease dissent from elite groups. By the end of the 1990s, the Egyptian government continued unbroken and reserved its strength to regulate outcomes *ex-post* (Okar, 2005, p.22). The 'trappings of democracy' and selective repression disintegrated political parties. The segmented political system, further consolidated by the government's support for internal conflict and factionalism in the opposition parties (Al-Wafd, Nasserist, Socialist Labor, Liberal, and Al-Ghad), crippled their ability to challenge the regime coherently (Shehata, 2010, p.34).⁹ Also, opposition leaders were nervous because of the fear of suppression in appropriating the masses' support to meet their political demands. Mubarak's rule, West alliance, and opponents' threats created an 'iron cage of liberalism' (Ritter, 2015, p.45).

The weakness of the political opponents allowed Mubarak to follow the 'one-party system led by the National Democratic Party (NDP). Sadat established NDP in 1976, but it remained the country's dominant political party till 2011. The dominance of NDP marginalized the military's role in politics. The NDP¹⁰ and business people were the central part of the government's most robust base among the social classes (Kandil, 2012, p.174). Only NDP-dominated Political Parties Committee gave other parties licenses for recognition (Zaki, 2007, p.51). The NDP always dominated Egypt's representative institutions by gaining 75-90 percent of the seats in all Parliament elections. The leadership of the party was either in the hands of the traditional guard

⁸ Stripped of their political and social agency, the people of Egypt were mere subjects, not citizens, as stipulated within their constitution (Hosseinioun, 2015, p.58).

⁹ Mubarak established a formidable apparatus akin to the Benthamite panopticon, constantly intimidating opponents in the hope of quashing any form of dissent (Heydarian, 2014, p.27). Despite the regime's prevalent oppression, it received financial aid maintaining the status quo established by Camp David Accord in 1979 from the EU and USA (Bome, 2015, p.23).

¹⁰ National Democratic Party (NDP) held a massive logistical advantage over its opponents through state control of most newspapers and all broadcasting news outlets NDP (Ayubi, 1989, p.13)

and technocrats. Mubarak's son Gamal Mubarak was a banker and became the NDP's deputy secretary (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, September 22).

Under Gamal, a state-business nexus run the regime with the help of the 'state-party'-NDP, business, and state cronies, MOI Habib al-Adli, cabinet members, and individuals (newspapers editors, directors of state-owned media, intellectuals, and university professors in the NDP Policies Committee), internal security services and the bureaucracy (Shahin, 2013, p.64). They depicted that Egypt is an emerging market and democracy. Thus, the entrenched praetorian regime remained insulated from any outside threat. However, the vertical differences between the military and the aging Mubarak nevertheless created irreversible conflict. During the 2011 popular uprising, the result was that the army focused on securing its core interests rather than saving the Mubarak regime.

Praetorian Rule Controls Economic Resources

In a typical praetorian state, the military is a multi-functional organization with political and economic roles (Wilfried, 2007, p.8). Generally, the military runs state-owned enterprises and private companies: the senior or retired military officers involved in the business (Picard, 1988, p.142). The military's involvement in the economy provides self-reliance and the civil structures to institutionalize the state so that the state security apparatus becomes part of people's economic and social welfare (Frisch, 2001, p.106). National security became the central point to utilize the economic resources to protect the military's privileges. Even emergency law remained in force to prevent any monitoring of the military's financial assets by legislation and the press.

The *Infitah* (opening) policy (1974) initiated partial economic liberalization that replaced Nasser's distributive 'social contract.' It reoriented the military at the center of national economic development (Gotowicki, 1999, p.116). Besides, the military discreetly controlled and managed its resources, labeled by critics as the 'black box' in Egypt (Sennott, 2012, January 2). Sadat founded Egypt as a dependent state. It was the non-developing, de-industrialized, and haphazardly liberalized state; Mubarak only followed in his footsteps (Kandil, 2012, p.161). Egypt made a strong alliance with the USA that expanded the economic leverage of a faction of elites at the cost of the dismantled Nasser era 'social contract'. Mubarak implemented the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that produced adverse outcomes due to the corruption and

‘red-tapism’ in bureaucracy (Basheer, 1999, p.14). As a result, Egypt became a corrupt police state par excellence.

Simultaneously, the military kept its interests secured by getting support from abroad and domestic private sectors regarding funding, technology, and joint ventures. Thus, the military itself had become part of the global business process. Now the top-notch retired and serving officers got involved in the lucrative business sector. Most governors and mayors were ex-military officers and appointed many retired officers as directors and managers of private companies (El Fadl, 2013, p.306).¹¹ The military planned to accumulate capital with the help of the private sector to create a new faction of the ruling class that did not focus on the economic production in the country (Joya, 2020, p.2). The military links with the neoliberal global economic order that perpetuated coercive apparatuses of the state against democratic practices and processes. Mubarak gave his son Gamal Mubarak a free hand to run the economy. A new class of young entrepreneurs sprung up under Gamal, who had created companies and factories in all sectors of the economy. The economy was improving steadily; yet, the middle class and the youth did not get any legitimate part of the benefits that ultimately escalated the socio-economic tensions in Egypt.

Mubarak preferred stability over the country’s economic development that reduced the chances of the emergence of a ‘reform-minded entrepreneurial class’ in Egypt (Povey, 2016, p.7). Later, as Mubarak’s policy of ‘provider’ of material benefits affected the economy’s decline, he started cutting off the subsidies. However, to ensure social cohesion, Mubarak had to rely on bribery and coercion. Unlike the oil-rich gulf countries, the republican military-led regimes are not rich in energy resources to earn petro-dollars. Mubarak’s regime, thus, faced resource limitations where it had to use the resources to co-opt big business, military, security service, regime intellectuals, and bureaucracy to sustain the praetorian system. The result was that most Egyptians had no access to essential economic resources. Besides, citizens faced regular violence and repression in the name of counter-terrorism. The prevailing situation made Egypt an unstable society, sitting on the regime’s brutal praetorian rule, exposed to the reaction of disgruntled Egyptians. The demand for stability rather than reform descended Egypt into chaos as the underground social,

¹¹ For instance, Oriental Weavers has retired army officers as its board of directors and managers (El Fadl, 2013, p.306).

political, economic differences came to the surface and created a sharp dividing line vertically and horizontally among different sections of Egyptian society (Cook, 2012, p.40).

Return of Military Praetorianism in Post-Mubarak Egypt

President Mubarak's thirty years of desire for stability became synonymous with instability. After a powerful popular uprising against Mubarak and the series of repressive measures by the regime against the protestors, on February 11, 2011, he resigned and left the military to rule under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). The SCAF assumed control of the state on February 10, 2011, by retaining the presidency, police, Mubarak's propaganda arm, the Ministry of Information, and his coercive instruments. Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi headed the SCAF (Azzam, 2012, p.2). Egypt's generals opted to back the uprising with a discreet roadmap. The country's military elites hedged their bets by quietly advancing its position in the government and simultaneously detaining, abusing, or enabling the police to assault protestors. It showed that Egypt had a political class and a 'deep state' with considerable experience in keeping control.

The SCAF structured its 'arbiter' role through a 'constitutional decree' that helped secure its core interests (budget, autonomy, and no presence of rival and military survival) by keeping the authority intact. The SCAF shaped and directed but even distorted the transition process because it kept the majority of the decision-making power at its disposal. The generals had identified the 'fault' line between the opposition on the identities of 'secular' and 'Islamist' confrontation. They successfully manipulated the divisions to position themselves as the ruler to decide Egypt's future of political transition.

The praetorian nature of SCAF was revealed when it implemented the paradoxical policies: first, it sided with the revolution from January 25 to February 11, 2011, and then it resisted any significant political reforms except dissolution of parliament and scrapping of the old constitution. Besides, the army used excessive violence against the advocates of democracy to deploy the same old methods of military police and intelligence apparatus (Said, 2012, pp.398-99). The military successfully took control over the transition because civilian political actors had a relative weakness and fragmentation. It was also a product of the strength provided by the military's legacy, based on its longstanding centrality in modern Egypt's historiography and its

rich endowment of political and economic resources (Springborg, 2013, p.94).¹² The SCAF continued with the neo-liberal economic policies to secure its financial interests.

The repression remained the primary weapon to muzzle the dissent despite the change of leadership in Egypt. This problem was brought to the fore by the Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) in its report, where it exposed that “the pillars and policies of the autocratic Mubarak regime had not been removed; security establishment had neither purged nor reformed; victims of the human rights abuses were not given justice in post-Mubarak Egypt, and a civil and democratic state was not established by a constitution that set the governance rules and delineates their prerogatives (2011, p.84).” Besides CIHRS, the Nadeem Center and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) drafted reports on human rights situations, provided legal assistance, observed elections, promoted democratic values, and pressurized regime to modify the Egyptian laws.

In the post-Mubarak political system, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) became the dominant political force. SCAF, eventually allied with MB, marginalized other political forces, notably the secular liberals and leftists. Under the new Constitution, Parliamentary elections were held in January 2012. The MB won the majority seats to form the government and committed to the business-friendly neo-liberal economic policy and an agreement to deal respectfully with the army. All this revealed that both had set for cohabitation to forge an unholy alliance in the government.

Despite the newly emerged consensus, the ruling MB and military fought to retain control over the state institutions reflected the ‘competitive authoritarianism.’ In 2011, the military launched a supplementary constitutional declaration to overtly grab extra-constitutional rights to reinforce its prerogatives to defend the constitution against the civilian presidency. The newly elected President, Mohammed Morsi, appointed Fatah Al-Sisi as the new Defense Minister, a SCAF member. The MB advanced its power at the expense of secular-liberal factions during Morsi’s Presidency. The power-sharing between Islamist and SCAF terminated with the collapse of the National Assembly in July 2012 by the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) on excluding liberal and secular sections of society.

¹² For instance, SCAF invited MB member Sobhi Saleh to become a member of the Constitutional Committee formed by the SCAF while excluding the representatives from secular parties or revolutionary youth groups.

In the meantime, President Morsi's constitutional decree on November 22, 2012, helped MB sign the constitution. The result was that the 'Islamist-dominated constitutional assembly' passed the constitutional draft on November 30, 2012. The focus was now on *Sharia Law* as the primary tenant for running the government and society (Hussein, 2012, November 30). Indeed, the idea of Islamization of the governance did not go well with the 'secular' praetorian military and intelligentsia. Besides, the revolutionary youth organizations that were secular rejected the Islamization of politics.

Consequently, oppositions, including National Salvation Front (NSF), April 6 Youth Movement, and Coptic Christian Church, spearheaded the protest under the banner of the 'Tamarod' (rebel) group, comprising mainly young pro-democracy activists against Morsi for enforcing an Islamist agenda in the country. Fearing theocracy, some appealed to the military, led by General Sisi, who duly launched a coup on July 3, 2013, and ordered the arrest of Morsi. The military undermined the political transition by a new referendum in 2014 in which Egyptians voted for Sisi to become the new President of Egypt.

The Rise of Fatah al-Sisi as 'Ruler-Arbiter'

Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was groomed into a personality cult before his announcement for the presidential election. He acquired several prominent political positions: the deputy Prime Minister, the in-charge of national security, and the Defense Minister. The military needed a strong leader in post-Mubarak politics. Sisi's increasing sway over Egypt made him a de-facto 'strongman' of the country. Following the tradition of his predecessors (Sadat and Mubarak), who went to the US to take military training and improving relationships, Sisi revamped the partnership with Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to acquire the economic and military aids. The increasing lack of legitimacy from the Egyptians pushed the military to gain legitimacy from the external actors, mainly the US, to consolidate Egypt's military rule.

Sisi followed two choices to stabilize the country: One, Egypt was put at the center rather than its people while dismantling the memories of the revolution. The impact of the 2011 Arab uprising has unraveled the 'political awakening' of the masses that had a very deep-rooted leaning for their political emancipation from the military. Consequently, under Sisi's rule, the freedom of the Egyptians faced gruesome constraints because the regime feared that the people could lead to the expansion of democratic forces at the cost of the reversal of military rule. Second, Sisi sought

economic development with the authoritarian tendency. The armed forces and the western counterparts of the regime ignored the brutal repression of political and social freedoms and gross violations of human rights. The improvement of the economy was based on neoliberal reforms to meet the basic needs of the Egyptians. The plan was to revive the ‘social contract’ of the Nasser era. Still, it remained in limbo because, in the neo-liberal economy, the desire of ‘business class’ for profit-making did not improve the conditions of the masses that toppled Mubarak from power.

General Sisi applied the ‘divide and rule policy to deepen the fraction in the widespread opposition group (seculars-liberals, leftists, revolutionary youth fronts, moderate and extreme religious groups). Along with the military and the relics of Mubarak’s coterie, in July 2013, launched a roadmap with the support from Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Pope Tawadros II Coptic Church, National Salvation Front, and Salafist Al-Nour Party. Subsequently, the military dismantled *Tahrir Square* to erase the ‘memories’ of the 2011 Egyptians uprising. The government erected a new dismal and remarkably unspectacular monument just after the military takeover. It reflected much about how the counter-revolution wished *Tahrir* to (not) be remembered (Bayat, 2017, p.133). Subsequently, the General Directorate of State Security Investigations Service (GDSSIS) was renamed Homeland Security in 2013. Now it was the leading organization that dealt with domestic security matters. The GDSSIS was a clandestine and pervasive organization aimed to use repressive measures to target any opposition, including liberals and seculars that demanded the fundamental rights of freedom and equality of individuals.

The MB-led protest swept the streets of Egypt against the ‘soft coup.’ The military quickly took control of the media and censored footage of pro-Morsi demonstrations aired by private satellite channels. In Khaled Abou Al-Fadl’s words, “By stepping in to remove an unpopular president, the Egyptian army re-affirmed a despotic tradition in the Middle East where army officers decide what the country needs, and they always know best” (2012, July 7). Sisi came out publicly at the graduation ceremony for the Navy and Air Defence academies. He said that “I told him (Morsi) six months ago that his project is not working out and that he should go back on it before it is too late” (Egypt Independent, 2013, July 24). The generals’ undoubtedly fear was that MB leaders reinforced the free market economy based on neo-liberal policies that would weaken the

military's monopoly over its resources. Thus, according to Talal Asad (2012, p.276), "the SCAF was motivated by various pressures: the ever-active radical revolutionaries; the increasing political landscape of MB; the financial and diplomatic maneuvering of the USA and Saudi Arabia and its institutional privileges."

The military shut down Islamists satellite channels, including *Al-Jazeera*, *Mubashir Misr*, and the Brotherhood's *Misr 25*, stations like *al-Hafiz* and *Al-Nas*, as the regime blamed them for supporting violence (Mustafa, 2013, July 5). Besides, the military used repressive measures to clear the MB supporters' streets, resulting in the killings of protestors at Rabaa Al-Adawiya Mosque and Nahda Square. (Al-Arian, 2014, August 14). On November 24, 2013, the regime launched a new decree to target the April 6 Movement and its leaders Ahmed Maher and Mohammed Adel (Kingsley, 2014, March 14). However, the pro-state media supported it, but the human rights organizations outrightly criticized it at national and international levels.

Egypt adopted the new constitution in January 2014 to strengthen the military, police, and judiciary. The army became the central political authority, and Egypt's coercive institutions (police and security agencies) reconsolidated society's dominance. A new counter-terrorism clause entrusted the military and security agencies with sweeping powers. The military now grabbed the power to veto the election for eight years of Defence Minister position (Kingsley, 2014, January 18; Maugiron, 2016). Sisi imposed a life ban on religious, political activity that further marginalized MB and other Islamist organizations. The SCC and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) had judicial sovereignty to conduct the critical assignment in appointing, transferring, and promoting the judges (Brown & Dunne, 2013, December 4). The military, however, authored the constitution to increase the judiciary's power to purge the protestors. The judges became the extended hands of the generals to punish the oppositions, particularly MB and youth. At the surface level, the text of the constitution remained pro-freedom. Still, it catered to the corporate interests of the state bureaucracies, more than ever shielded from civil society's interference in their dealings. The post-coup constitution confirmed the military budget's complete secrecy and unlimited freedom to exercise authority with total control over the judiciary.

General Sisi resigned from the military position on March 26, 2014, to run for President. The regime and opposition already accepted him as the dominant character in the military-led post-MB provisional authority. Even Sisi became the entity of cult-like prevalent devoutness while

displaying proficiency as a ‘political tactician.’ The shift was visible in Sisi’s speeches on media platforms and election campaigns where he focused on ‘Strong Egypt’ and ‘Long Live Egypt.’ As a President of Egypt, Sisi stressed the restoration of *haybat al-dawla* (the fear/respect of state) to eliminate terrorism. The regime projected a ‘welfare-populist’ image of Sisi that promised to improve housing, agriculture, education, poverty-stricken areas, and boosting employment (Yossef & Cerami, 2015, p.18). With no legislature in place following his election, Sisi ruled by decree of October 2014. The regulation positioned all public and vital facilities under military jurisdiction, resulting in the transfer of thousands of protesters’ trials in the military courts with usually fabricated charges and was denied to provide the ‘due process of law’ mechanism.

Egypt employed several repressive laws and draconian tactics to impede any protest that could challenge the regime's stability. The Sisi’s government extended its crackdown to secular, Islamists and liberal parties, individuals, and journalists. The authority widened the scope of repressive laws to include labor strikes, traffic disruptions, and the spread of false information. The repressive measures bolstered the state's grip on power by further eroding judicial independence and imposing suffocating restrictions on the media, NGOs, trade unions, political parties, independent groups, and activists.

Sisi successfully consolidated his authority because there was no unified leadership of the opposition movement; many leaders had different goals. The moderate Al-Azhar and the minority Coptic Church faced insecurity both from the regime's suppression tactics and the threat of the *Brotherhoodization* by the Islamists. The result was that Al-Azhar and Coptic Church supported the Sisi that increased the legitimacy of his regime. The claim for supporting Sisi was to prevent the bloodshed on the streets and conduct free and fair elections. Besides, the religious blocs, Ahmed al-Tayeb and Pope Tawadros II wanted to secure their positions in their community against the fear of military intervention (Fahim, 2014, July 4; Al Anani, 2020, July 20). Therefore, both supported Sisi-led military-security apparatuses to dislodge the MB from power.

The ultra-Islamist Salafists supported Morsi’s ouster because they wanted to create their political space in the post-Mubarak fluid political landscape. Sisi backed the uprising against Morsi. MB blamed him for waging war against Islam. Therefore, Sisi welcomed the Salafists to discredit the claims of MB. With the support of the state, Salafists were successful in maintaining a

significant presence in the mosque despite the regular demands from secular and liberal Egyptians to ban their presence (Emam, 2018, January 28). The secular-democratic April 6 Movement supported the Sisi to strengthen democracy, secularism, social justice, and free and fair elections against Morsi's Islamization plan of the Egyptian state (Carr, 2012, April 6). However, after the coup, the regime targeted the youth movement and banned its leaders from political participation. The repression started with MB, spreading to the April 6 Movement, journalists, Al-Jazeera, youth, and gays. Currently, Egypt has kept twenty thousand political prisoners. There was a restriction on gathering more than ten people publicly, the imposition of false charges, hefty penalty and fine on protestors for their anti-regime political statements, and issuing mass death sentences to MB members (Human Rights Watch, 2013, November 26).

President Sisi came with a plan to protect the interests of the military; therefore, he did nothing to bridge the ideological differences as a divided opposition was conducive to the survival of the military's rule. Sisi has returned the military to the forefront of the political system by implementing authoritarian measures to refute the democratic gains of the Arab upheaval. Sisi projected the threat of *Brotherhoodization* of Egypt to influence the liberals and seculars to support the military. The result was that it was easy for the military to reverse the initial democratic progress made during the revolt against Mubarak and established the domination of the 'one-party' led by the 'ruler-arbiter' praetorian military (Esposito, Sonn & Voll, 2015, p.230).

President Sisi openly selected a severe political model by announcing that "democracy is a luxury the country cannot yet afford and that the constitution, while good, cannot be implemented immediately" (Emir, 2015, June 8). He emphasized that the priority must be to restore security and rebuild a robust Egyptian state, and citizens must sacrifice their interests to those of the state. Besides, Sisi ensured that the media sector remained submissive, suppressed human rights organizations, foreign scholars barred, domestic critics, arrested, state-imposed surveillance on electronic communications to move within and outside Egypt, and some even forced exile. Consequently, the competitive norms in parliamentary elections replaced violent tactics to terminate any potent opposition from political organizations, media, and civil society.

The culture of repression against oppositions had a typical pattern followed by all authoritarian regimes, including Egypt. Under Fatah al-Sisi rule, it became an indispensable plan to achieve

the state's regime's existence and order. Repression was the inherent part of the structure of power. It became the backbone of the authoritarian regime when it could not garner any more legitimacy from the society. Repressive measures were employed when positive outcomes surpassed the invested costs. It was a well-established fact that withholding power was the decisive expected benefit to survive the rule (Joshua & Edel, 2014, p.4). The emergency law has remained in place since October 2014. The civil society faced massive repression by the police that curtailed Egypt's civil and political rights (Teti, Abbott & Cavatorta, 2018, p.7).

President Sisi also targeted the recently opened public spaces for gays and women in post-Mubarak politics. With the collapse of the democratic experiment, the police and security forces did witch-hunting of gays and women on the charges of homosexuality because they were the torchbearers of the Egyptian revolution. The state-sponsored media and pro-government private media created a supremacist image of Sisi. The media exalted General Sisi as the 'lion of Egypt' and the nation's 'real man' (El-Shenawi, 2020, May 20). These features of Sisi denoted the establishment of 'strongman' politics in Egypt. Regular propaganda was launched that depicted gays as 'female-like or 'half man.' It indeed served the new national chauvinist narrative that the post-Morsi counter-revolutionaries championed patriarchal sensibilities and conservative religiosity of the Egyptian society. In 2014, the Egyptian Ministries of Youth and Endowments (Religious Affairs) created a national plan to combat the atheist phenomenon through education, religious, and psychological means (Bayat, 2017, p.184). The plan was to perpetuate the uniformity in Egyptian society, driven by military-dominated hyper-nationalism devoid of any space of alternative thinking.

President Sisi successfully appointed loyal professionals and patrimonial-oriented officers in government institutions to establish a deep-seated societal network of the military elites. Only the military's privileges and officers had no accountability towards the citizens and society. Sisi also granted himself the power to dismiss the heads of state's auditing bodies in a 2015 decree. Recently, President Sisi amended the constitution to rule until 2030, explaining that the ruler-arbiter praetorian regime in Egypt reconsolidated itself.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to explain the structural and agential factors that account for the military's persistence to intervene in politics to shape the trajectory of democratization in Egypt.

The military is the most powerful institution in post-colonial countries with all the military might and rentier economies, including external aid. The result is that the army has established patrimonial alliances with the masses through the vast networks of exchanges of resources that bind society to remain de-politicized, coupled with the series of repressive measures to contain any kind of oppositions to the generals. The low level of political institutionalization and high level of patron-client relationship based on informal networks and patrimonialism helped the military monopolize over the 'legitimacy' to become the sole authority of the Egyptian state. Military leaders allowed partial liberalization and controlled democratization to challenge the genuine oppositions that made Egypt 'liberalized autocracy.' The dominant one-party system became the source of political legitimacy for the regime under the leadership of the National Democratic Party (NDP). A nexus of NDP, business, and political cronies created the rule under Mubarak that was liberal in its outlook but deeply repressive against the domestic opponents. Thus, the military became the center of power, based on officers-led praetorian politics. The complex control system, therefore, sustained the praetorian rule in Egypt. It was produced by Nasser and Sadat and carried forward by Mubarak.

The popular uprising against the autocratic Mubarak regime set off the political transition. After toppling Mubarak's government, the united opposition lost in the transition process. It did not realize that it was not only Mubarak and the repressive police system that was part of the counter-revolutionary forces. But it was also the profoundly military-ruled Nasser's 'praetorian' state that dominated the Egyptian state and society from behind the curtain. The secular-liberal opposition and Islamists failed to forge a consensus that allowed the military to fill the political void to stabilize the country under the leadership of Sisi.

Nevertheless, the magic of *Tahrir* and *Taghir* removed Mubarak. However, the uprising made no concrete transformation toward a democratic transition in terms of 'structural' changes. Therefore, Egypt witnessed a 'half revolution.'

The 'ruler-arbiter' regime now dominated the executive because the military remained its primary source of support. President Sisi did not revive the NDP to accumulate political power under the party-state system. Instead, Sisi became the only source of authority and power that protected the state. Any alternative source of information, dialogue, and ideas from non-military sources is considered anti-state and anti-Sisi in Egypt. It resulted in the complete crushing of the

independent civil society and individual freedom, which led to the consolidation of the robust praetorian rule, based on the ruler-arbiter model that is the sole driver of strongman politics Sisi. The breakdown of the democratization process attributed more to the persistence of the structure of the old military-led control, directed by the agential-driven leadership of the Sisi. Therefore, the combination of structural and agential factors created the praetorian 'ruler-arbiter' regime that restricted any democratic transition. To remove the democratically elected President Morsi, Sisi showed the commitment to protect the democratization from Islamists and authoritarian tendencies. It pushed the democratic change to 'democratic backsliding.' Freedom House's Freedom in the World Report mentioned that "Egypt Not Free" in 2017 due to the sharp decline in press freedom, net freedom, political and civil rights. The return of the military under the leadership of Sisi as the ultimate 'arbiter' revealed what Guillermo O'Donnell calls 'sudden death' of democratization in Egypt.

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