

3. Egypt: The Pandemic Crisis in a Time of Authoritarianism

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Over the last decade, Egypt has witnessed significant political upheaval, resulting in two major political schisms in the social uprising of 2011 and the popularly backed military coup that followed in 2013. The political opening brought about by the removal of reigning strongman President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak in 2011 brought about short-lived but monumental political change and created opportunities for pluralism in politics, a widening of civic space and civil society activity, and freer, more independent media. However, the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated transition period resulted in societal fear of a perceived shift in the nature of Egypt's identity and widespread discontent both about the nature of the party's brand of leadership and the direction which it was felt the country was moving toward.

The 30 June protests led to the ouster of then-President (and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, FJP) Mohamed Morsi by the military, backed by popular support from the street in the form of mass protests.¹ In the years since July 2013 there has been an unprecedented crackdown on fundamental freedoms, such as expression, assembly, and speech as well as widely documented human rights abuses through the arguably unlawful detention of tens of thousands

¹ D.D. Kirkpatrick, "Army Ousts Egypt's President; Morsi Is Taken Into Military Custody", *The New York Times*, 3 July 2013.

of political dissidents and civic activists. The crackdown has also seen a complete closure of political space through years of slow erasure of the thriving pluralism initially created in 2011. The leadership of President (and former Military Field Marshall) Abdel Fattah Al Sisi (2014-present) has gone beyond simply retrenching the decades-long tradition of one-party rule in Egypt.² Rather, the leadership of Sisi has pursued control over all state institutions, silencing the judiciary and Parliament into complete submission to the executive and ultimately erasing the “Separation of Powers” principle.³

With new challenges presented as of late by the Covid-19 pandemic, President Sisi has sought to absorb even more power, amending instructive legislation to allow the executive branch to gain further legislative and judicial power as well as expanding the administrative control of the state.⁴ Covid-19 has effectively provided the context for which Egypt’s President can continue to further entrench authoritarian practice and expand toward totalitarianism as the defining feature of his rule.

Egypt’s Last Decade: from Democratic Transition to Military Rule

Following the uprising that led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak from power in 2011, Egypt witnessed a groundswell of civic and political engagement and activity. Over 160 political parties were formed, registering for the country’s first post-revolution elections that took place between November 2011 and January 2012.⁵ 67 political parties won seats in the election

² *Egypt under Sisi: From Authoritarian Dominant Party System to Strongman Politics*, JETRO-IDE ME-Review, vol. 6, 2018-2019, pp. 1-3.

³ *2019 Constitutional Amendments*, Policy Brief, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), 17 April 2019.

⁴ Amendments to: Emergency Law 1958 (and amendments); Counterterrorism Laws 2015 (and amendments), Penal Code 1937 (and amendments).

⁵ Author’s own knowledge as Political Parties Researcher and registered Elections Observer for Egypt’s Parliamentary Elections for the National Democratic

for the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament, through a newly introduced mixed proportional representation list and individual candidacy districts.⁶ Over 90% of those parties were deemed newly formed political groups that emerged following the protests that engulfed the country. While the majority of seats belonged to the Islamist Bloc of parties (who had run collectively on the Democratic Front list and included a collective group of Salafi political parties as well as the FJP), an array of political thought was reflected in the eclectic Parliament. Self-identified centrists, leftists, Islamists, socialists, and even “former regime” politicians represented Egypt’s first, and only, genuine democratic effort.

The presidential elections that ensued a year later had, at their peak, 14 candidates from all parts of the political spectrum, including representatives of the Mubarak regime and Political Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood and other groups).⁷ The first and second rounds of voting in a first-past-the-post system came on either side of a monumental decision from the Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve the elected Lower House of Parliament.⁸ The court’s decision was a monumental blow to the democratic transition, despite being cheered by more centrist MPs and supposed liberals. It also impacted the decision-making of voters in the presidential election, left at the final stage to choose between Mubarak’s last Prime Minister and former Air Commander Ahmed Shafiq, or the FJP leader and senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau, Mohamed Morsi. The result was a heavily contested election, barely won in the end by FJP leader Morsi.⁹

Institute (July 2011 - February 2012).

⁶ *Final Report of the Carter Center Mission to Witness the 2011-12 Parliamentary Elections in Egypt*, Carter Center, August 2012.

⁷ T. Plofchan, “Candidates in the 2012 Egyptian Presidential Election”, *The Cairo Review*, 27 April 2012.

⁸ “Egypt’s supreme court dissolves parliament and outrages Islamists”, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2012.

⁹ D.D. Kirkpatrick, “Named Egypt’s Winner, Islamist Makes History”, *The New York Times*, 24 June 2012.

The vote itself was mired in controversy. The FJP/MB had deployed tens of thousands of polling agents to every single one of Egypt's 16,000 poll stations to observe the vote and ballot counting.¹⁰ As a result, the FJP declared victory over a week before the official decision came from the Presidential Elections Committee, ultimately politicizing the entire democratic exercise and putting in doubt the genuine result. The contest left a sour taste in the mouths of political opponents to the MB, with civic activists feeling betrayed and no political representative in the highest office. The election acted to effectively kill off initial hopes that either a non-Islamist or non-regime politician could yield political power in the country.

Throughout the period from Morsi's inauguration until protests once again removed a president from power exactly a year later, Egypt continued to demonstrate and exercise political pluralism, albeit less effectively than during the immediate post-2011 transition. Opposition grew – within both political and civic spaces – over the activity and decision-making of the sitting president, including attempts to subvert the constitution and declare the executive immune from oversight.¹¹ As a result, violent protests began to emerge between political actors or those they represented, eroding the pluralistic gains made.¹² Slowly but surely, dependence on the military institution became more evident until it reached a fever pitch in June 2013, with citizens actively calling for a return to military rule. On 3 July 2013, then Defense Minister Abdel Fattah Al Sisi addressed the public, stating that the military had removed President Morsi in a bloodless coup, and announcing a roadmap for an alleged transition.¹³

¹⁰ *EISA Election Witnessing Mission Report*, Electoral Institute for Sustainability in Africa (EISA), Egypt: Presidential Elections Report no. 45, 2013.

¹¹ “[English text of Morsi's Constitutional Declaration](#)”, *Abram Online*, 22 November 2012.

¹² “[Egypt: The Constitutional Declaration and the Spiraling Violence in Egypt that Leads the Country Away from the Path to Democracy](#)”, *Euromed Rights*, 6 December 2012.

¹³ “[Egyptian army suspends constitution and removes President Morsi – as it happened](#)”, *The Guardian*, 3 July 2013.

Instead of renewed democratic transition, however, the removal of the MB from power saw tens of thousands arrested as political prisoners and thousands more forced to flee the country, their assets and finances seized by the state.¹⁴ The crackdown on all forms of freedom began almost as soon as Morsi was removed, as the military and other security forces (military police, central security forces, state security, etc.) clashed with civilian protestors who opposed the coup. The stand-off culminated in the largest one-day massacre of civilians the country has arguably ever seen, as up to (and possibly more than) 1,000 protestors were killed on 14 August 2013, with the clearing of protests in squares in central and north Cairo districts.¹⁵

Following the removal of Political Islamists from power and any form of political life, interim President Adly Mansour (largely believed to have been acting on behalf of current President Sisi at the time), outlawed the entire organization and passed emergency legislation equating Political Islam with terrorism. This was quickly followed by reams of legislation that banned any protest gatherings,¹⁶ declared almost all state institutions military institutions (and thus subject to military jurisdiction and laws),¹⁷ and allowed police access to public and private institutions such as banks and universities.¹⁸ New laws were also drafted to institutionalize years-long security management

¹⁴ Z. Laub, *Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood*, Council on Foreign Relations, last updated 15 August 2019.

¹⁵ *The Weeks of Killing, State Violence, Communal Fighting and Sectarian Attacks in the Summer of 2013*, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), 14 June 2014.

¹⁶ "Egypt: President Approves Anti-Protest Law", *Library of Congress*, Global Legal Monitor 13 December 2013.

¹⁷ S. Aziz, *The Expanding Jurisdiction of Egypt's Military Courts*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 October 2016.

¹⁸ E. Hamed, "Egyptians divided over police presence on university campuses", *Al-Monitor*, 16 April 2014.

of civil society,¹⁹ block the receipt of foreign funding,²⁰ and expand active cases against foreign and local NGOs, ensnaring dozens and then hundreds of civic actors.²¹ Many high-profile civilian activists were also arrested and jailed.²²

By the time President Sisi came to power officially through elections in 2014, Egypt's democratic reversal was well under way. Since then, however, the crackdown has taken on prolonged and more severe forms. The "disappearing" of individuals has become a common practice by security forces in a country where detention is the main tactic against dissent.²³ Hundreds of NGOs have been forced to close owing to lack of resources or pressure from security forces, as they create a climate of fear once again. Thousands of political activists now languish in pre-trial detention,²⁴ while senior FJP/MB figures are dying in prison²⁵. Political parties have either dissolved themselves, fearful of the security crackdown, or have been silenced into submission by the ruling regime.²⁶ The Judiciary has lost almost all of its independence and ability to challenge the regime due to

¹⁹ *Proposed Government Law Makes NGOs Subordinate to Security and Ministry Control*, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Right (EIPR), Press Release, 9 July 2014.

²⁰ R. Gehad, "Egypt amends penal code to stipulate harsher punishments on foreign funding", *Abram Online*, 23 September 2014.

²¹ Miller and M. Suter, *Case No. 173: The State of Egypt's NGOs*, Atlantic Council, 29 March 2016.

²² *Timep Brief: Case 173: Egypt's Foreign Funding Case*, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), 28 February 2019.

²³ R. Trafford and M. Ramadhani, "Ruling by fear: Egyptian government 'disappears' 1,840 people in just 12 months", *The Independent*, 10 March 2016.

²⁴ A. Mikhail, "Interpreting Egypt's Pretrial Detention Laws", *Lanfare*, 10 November 2015.

²⁵ Senior MB leaders who have died while in detention since 2013 include: former Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef (2017), former President Mohamed Morsi (2019), senior leader and MP Essam el Erain (2020). Senior MB leaders who have died while in detention since 2013 include: former Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef (2017), former President Mohamed Morsi (2019), senior leader and MP Essam el Erain (2020).

²⁶ M. Dunne and A. Hamzawy, *Egypt's Secular Political Parties: A Struggle for Identity and Independence*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 March 2017.

constitutional amendments that have removed such modalities from the institution.²⁷ Parliament has become an institution that is socially mocked and politically inept, reinstated through elections in late 2015 only to provide a legislative mask for President Sisi's practices, seen as more of a way to placate the international community than any sort of commitment to democratization.²⁸

Meanwhile, Egypt has suffered socially and economically. An economic crisis that came with the political upheaval forced a significant concession to the international community, resulting in the approval of a US\$12 billion IMF (International Monetary Fund) agreement.²⁹ The result has seen subsidies lifted, the currency devalued by over half, and income wealth destroyed.³⁰ Consumer spending remains low, inflation has tripled effectively since 2016, and ordinary Egyptians struggle under the weight of financial burdens. Meanwhile, military companies flood the private sector, unfairly competing with civilian companies and foreign investment to gain access to Egypt's riches.

Egypt and Covid-19

On 20 September 2019, a few months before the world would become embroiled in the Covid-19 pandemic, President Sisi witnessed the first genuine social challenge to his leadership since he came to power.³¹ Small, short-lived protests swept across

²⁷ *Egypt Constitutional Amendments: Unaccountable Military, Unchecked President and a Subordinated Judiciary*, International Commission of Jurists, April 2019.

²⁸ S. Hamad, "A cabinet of kleptocracy in Sisi's pseudo-parliament", *The New Arab*, 23 April 2018.

²⁹ [IMF Executive Board Approves US\\$12 billion Extended Arrangement Under the Extended Fund Facility for Egypt](#), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Press Release no. 16/501, 11 November 2016.

³⁰ A. Khafagy, "Celebrating poverty: the IMF in Egypt", *openDemocracy*, 15 November 2019.

³¹ "Egyptian authorities threaten to 'decisively confront' protesters", *The Guardian*, 26 September 2019.

a number of cities in Egypt in response to viral claims from a disgruntled military contractor that the military institution and the President were institutionally corrupt. Protests only lasted a few hours and barely managed to gather a few thousand people in each city but sent shockwaves through the country and among the ruling military. In the days that followed, thousands of people were rounded up and detained, including high profile activists who had celebrated the protests online (though no evidence shows they were present themselves), and the security services swarmed city centers setting up checkpoints and stopping citizens at random, primarily to check social media activity on their mobile phones. Private media – once somewhat independent, but nowadays largely owned and coopted by the intelligence and security apparatus – encouraged citizens to alert the police if they encountered dissent in public or online. Independent journalists – already heavily threatened in the country – were targeted, and a significant number were arrested.

However, while the political and civic space was effectively closing prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, Egypt's economy was riding high after a successful 2019.³² Despite the continued dominance of the military apparatus in the economy, tourism was back to an eight year high,³³ remittances for the year totaled their highest percentage of GDP,³⁴ large gas discoveries were driving increased oil and gas investment in the country, and international financial experts and investors were excited about the prospects in Egypt.³⁵

Much like the rest of the world, Egypt has since been severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and its global and domestic ramifications. The economic fallout has been

³² T. Kaldas, *Egypt's Economy Faces a Double Whammy*, Bloomberg Opinion, 10 March 2020.

³³ M. Maged, "Egypt's tourism saw 21% growth in 2019: UNWTO", *Egypt Independent*, 22 January 2020.

³⁴ "Egypt Remittances: 2002-2019 Data", Trading Economics.

³⁵ "S&P positive outlook for Egypt promises new foreign investments in 2020: Moeit", *MENAFN Daily News Egypt*, 12 January 2020.

significant, with tourism reduced to zero and an oil price crash that has jeopardized remittances from the Gulf countries (and Egyptians working abroad), and threatened Egypt's own natural resources market.³⁶

It has also come with a significant healthcare toll³⁷. The region as a whole has generally emerged from the first phase of the global pandemic with one of the lowest death rates, leading people to draw assumptions related to the young demographic across the MENA region, as well as questions related to climate and possible genetic conditions that could be contributive (albeit all speculative). For its part, Egypt initially benefited generally from a rather "slow curve" of Covid-19 progression across the country, however, the state has been criticized by healthcare specialists for not taking advantage of a relatively contained virus spread at the outset.³⁸

Although actual numbers are believed to be much higher, per capita figure comparisons show that Egypt has not suffered the kind of debilitating virus outbreak that other countries in the region, such as Iran or Iraq, have faced. Nevertheless, the outbreak brought with it severe stress on Egypt's healthcare system, and exposed the country's consistently failing bureaucracy.³⁹ While the global economy slowed to a halt, the country closed its international air space but initially imposed minimal closures of public spaces. As the outbreak progressed, curfew measures and closures of hospitality and green spaces were introduced, as well as specific measures for treatment at hospitals.

³⁶ [Egypt's Economy under COVID: Threats and Opportunities](#)", webinar discussion, Middle East Institute, 15 June 2020.

³⁷ S. Amin, "[Pandemic further strains Egypt's dilapidated health system](#)", *Al-Monitor*, 8 April 2020.

³⁸ "[Egypt Faces the Pandemic: Health and Economic Effect](#)", webinar discussion, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 June 2020.

³⁹ B. Trew, "[Risk death or risk jail: Health workers around the world detained and attacked during the pandemic](#)", *The Independent*, 19 July 2020.

While the presidency publicly paraded its efforts to support other countries by supplying personal protective equipment (such as the UK, US, Italy, Sudan), doctors slowly began to protest their own lack of equipment and protective measures.⁴⁰ Dissent grew among healthcare workers as doctors and other staff began to suffer themselves from the virus, with anger becoming harnessed by the Doctor's Syndicate, formalizing grievances and institutionally challenging the government's response to the pandemic. The government was continually forced to respond to accusations it had left healthcare workers to die, with social debate, religious scholars, and public figures all weighing in on the growing protests from healthcare professionals.⁴¹

Unsurprisingly, the President was largely absent for large parts of the domestic Covid-19 response. Earlier believed to be suffering himself from the virus,⁴² Sisi's absence has since become evidence of a political decision to channel dissent and anger with the domestic Covid-19 response toward the civilian government. As if on cue, as Covid-19 patient numbers swelled and hospitals became overrun, the military – led by President Sisi – announced the opening of a 4,000-bed field hospital created in the heart of Cairo to support the efforts against the virus.⁴³

Throughout 2020, as the country battles Covid-19 and the economic hardship that endures as a result, authoritarian measures and practice have only continued. Egypt has already been under continuous Emergency Law provisions since early 2017, however, amendments forced through early on during the

⁴⁰ “Coronavirus: Egypt sends medical gowns for British health workers”, *The National*, 14 April 2020.

⁴¹ J. Rothwell, “Egyptian doctors accused of treason after criticising government's coronavirus response”, *The Telegraph*, 8 June 2020.

⁴² Interview with retired military official, via skype, March 2020. Interview with retired military official, via skype, March 2020.

⁴³ “Egypt's Sisi tours Armed Forces medical isolation facilities”, *Abram Online*, 27 June 2020.

pandemic response have seen the President's powers widened at the expense of legal and administrative arms of the state. The President continues to centralize all forms of decision-making and power yielded in the Executive Office, and namely the presidency. As a result, authoritarian practices not only remain omnipresent within society but are becoming harsher still.

A continued crackdown on freedom of expression and speech during the pandemic saw arrests spread from journalists, to female “TikTok” users,⁴⁴ to a number of healthcare professionals who openly criticized the state response to Covid-19. Doctors were arrested for protesting the lack of protective equipment – refusing to treat Covid-19 patients – following a number of deaths of young doctors from the virus.⁴⁵ Beyond the arrests, the state sought to demonize healthcare workers among the general public, invoking some of the country's most senior religious leaders to declare them “murderers” for protesting and refusing to treat patients.⁴⁶

As the country retreated to their homes, prayers were suspended, and mosques were closed. Ramadan iftars and “*taraweeh*” prayers were also cancelled. As citizens retreated from the hustle and bustle of daily life, little was left to occupy them, and as a result social and political issues have since obsessed ordinary citizens. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing challenges as depicted by healthcare workers, the country has witnessed a gender-rights revolution in and of itself, as online testimonials of sexual assault have gone viral and expanded, ensnaring a number of institutions and segments of the public.⁴⁷ While this particular topic has forced the government to impose new legal conditions on confidentiality

⁴⁴ “Egypt imprisons female TikTok influencers”, *Deutsche Welle*, 29 July 2020.

⁴⁵ S. Devi, “Egyptian health workers arrested after Covid-19 comments”, *The Lancet*, 8 August 2020.

⁴⁶ “يديف.. ببس لتلاب لتاق هريغل انوروك سوريف لقان: عجمج يلع” (“Ali Jumaa: The transmission of the Corona virus to another fought by causing ... my blood”), *Sada Al Balad reporting*, 7 June 2020.

⁴⁷ “Is Egypt finally reckoning with sexual assault?”, *Al Jazeera*, 14 August 2020.

of victim testimonials, and introduce debate on a draft sexual violence law, the nature of the state is still to confront and crush dissent in all its forms. At least nine women have been arrested for their *TikTok* activity, accused of “debauchery” or “violating public norms and family values”. Three women have already been sentenced to up to three years in prison.

Furthermore, the crackdown on the media and journalists continues, with Covid-19 providing no relief in the years-long repression freedom of speech.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the President passes legislation at will, continuing to curb all forms of fundamental freedoms. As well as the Emergency Law amendments passed, amendments to the penal code and the package of counterterrorism laws have also been made while the country is preoccupied with the pandemic.

Entrenching Authoritarianism

Egypt under President Sisi is well known for authoritarian practice and the closure of civic and political space. The Covid-19 pandemic has merely offered the President a new guise within which to pass and enact oppressive legislation that either further entrenches preexisting practices already or introduces new, harsher conditions upon ordinary citizens. As the country adjusts to a slow re-opening of its economy and cautious resumption of normal life, the President fast-tracked legislation and Upper House (Senate) elections in August 2020.⁴⁹

While elections have been a contested but genuine opening for political debate – even under more recent repression – in their various iterations over the last decade, the August 2020 Senate elections were notable only in how they brought back imagery

⁴⁸ C. MacDiarmid, “Journalist arrested for criticising Egypt’s coronavirus response dies after catching it in jail”, *The Telegraph*, 14 July 2020.

⁴⁹ M. Mourad, “Egyptians vote for newly created Senate”, *Reuters*, 11 August 2020.

from the Mubarak era: there was little to no acknowledgement elections were even happening, state TV played reams of film showing citizens in the street celebrating elections, vote-buying featured as a common state-deployed tactic, and apathy largely dominated public response to the elections. The amended laws were also not subject to any judicial or external review, nor was the generally sensitive topic of candidate districts addressed.⁵⁰

That the pandemic has presented new challenges to the state is not to say that this behavior deviates from that which defines this regime, nor that it will continue unimpeded or unchallenged. Egypt's ruling class have reverted to a form of authoritarianism that served Mubarak well for decades, albeit resulting in his eventual removal; however, the current military institution is neither as homogenous as Mubarak's wider leadership was, nor is it as malleable as President Sisi desires.

Propelled by paranoia, genuine cracks have been opening within the military apparatus for years – even before President Sisi came to power. Part of the reasoning behind the authoritarian practice exercised by the Presidency is, in effect, an attempt to put down either rumors or active dissent among both senior military leaders and the lower rank and file of the institution. Over the years the country has witnessed successive public purges of senior military generals, as well as a quieter – almost secretive – string of military court cases against hundreds of young Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) believed to oppose President Sisi's agenda.

⁵⁰ Egypt's electoral laws have historically come under severe scrutiny from the SCC over the years, including during the transition period between 2011-13. Since President Sisi has come to power, the laws have not faced scrutiny, owing both to the continued reversion to the 2014 presidential elections law that designated districts that remain in place, but also because the Judicial Appointments Law amended by President Sisi in 2017 gave him full authority to designate the makeup of the SCC, resulting in a quiet and pliant court – in contrast to its usual, relatively independent political and judicial nature.

While President Sisi is clearly a strongman, he does not necessarily enjoy the kind of wholesale support that his predecessors have done, nor has he ever been able to win over complete internal legitimacy for his rise to power. Therefore, means by which to entrench authoritarianism across the country's civilian political space also act to inhibit threats from within the military or broader security apparatus. This has served the President well for a number of years, although it is believed to have been challenged of late, some allege even coinciding with the small civilian protests seen in 2019.⁵¹ More recent legislation passed to prevent any active or retired military officer from running for any form of public office without approval from the most senior military leaders appears to reflect an attempt by the President to curb ambitions within the military, but also to protect his own brand of leadership that has never quite fully consolidated to date.⁵²

Conclusion

Egypt has been largely and rightly defined over the last decade for its increased repression, human rights abuses, and primarily the almost complete militarization of civilian way of life, including political and civic rights and activity. Under the leadership that followed the largely pluralistic period between 2011 and 2013, the country has slowly regressed to a position of almost complete political inactivity and unexercised political rights. However, that does not necessarily extend to the general political apathy that defined the majority of the era under former President Hosni Mubarak.

Indeed, the Egyptian citizenry as a whole was awakened by the events of 2011 and continued to openly and actively mobilize for a prolonged period of time, arguably exhausting

⁵¹ Interview with Egyptian former official, via skype, May 2020.

⁵² “[Egypt’s Sisi approves ban on retired army officers standing for election](#)”, *Reuters*, 29 July 2020.

the public into submission under the threats now posed. There may be little to no room for genuine expression or space to exercise political rights in the current day, but that is not to say that ordinary Egyptian civilians are not politically motivated or have recused themselves from political life.

While there remain only very few who continue to challenge the regime's repression openly through civic engagement and political activity, personal relationships and day-to-day conversations remain highly politicized. The country continues to see individual and collective political expression, and it is reflective of the desire for political representation and rights that only with extreme repression and complete closure of civic and political space has the regime been able to snuff out collective civilian power able to challenge leadership and hold the regime to account.