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In Egypt, a presidential election is scheduled to be held around the middle of 2018. While three people have announced their candidacy, President Sisi has not made his intentions clear so far. Egyptian popular dissatisfaction with the government has grown due to recent price increases. If Sisi runs, however, his victory is predicted to be virtually certain. Please find below an analysis report prepared by Misa Kanaya, our research fellow, on reasons behind such a prediction and the risks inherent in the current administration's approach to governance.

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Outlook for the 2018 Egyptian Presidential Election

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Nearly four years have passed since President Sisi took power on June 8, 2014. The question of whether Sisi will announce his candidacy to run for a second term in the 2018 presidential election is drawing a great deal of attention. Article 140 of Egypt's Constitution prescribes that

the procedures for electing the President of the Republic shall be initiated at least one hundred twenty days prior to the end of the presidential term. The result must be announced at least thirty days prior to the end of such term.

In other words, the presidential election must be held by early May 2018, and election procedures, such as candidacy registration, must be initiated by early February 2018. If the presidential election is to be held as scheduled, political activities and procedures required for the election should be commenced in the near future. Sisi, however, has only spoken

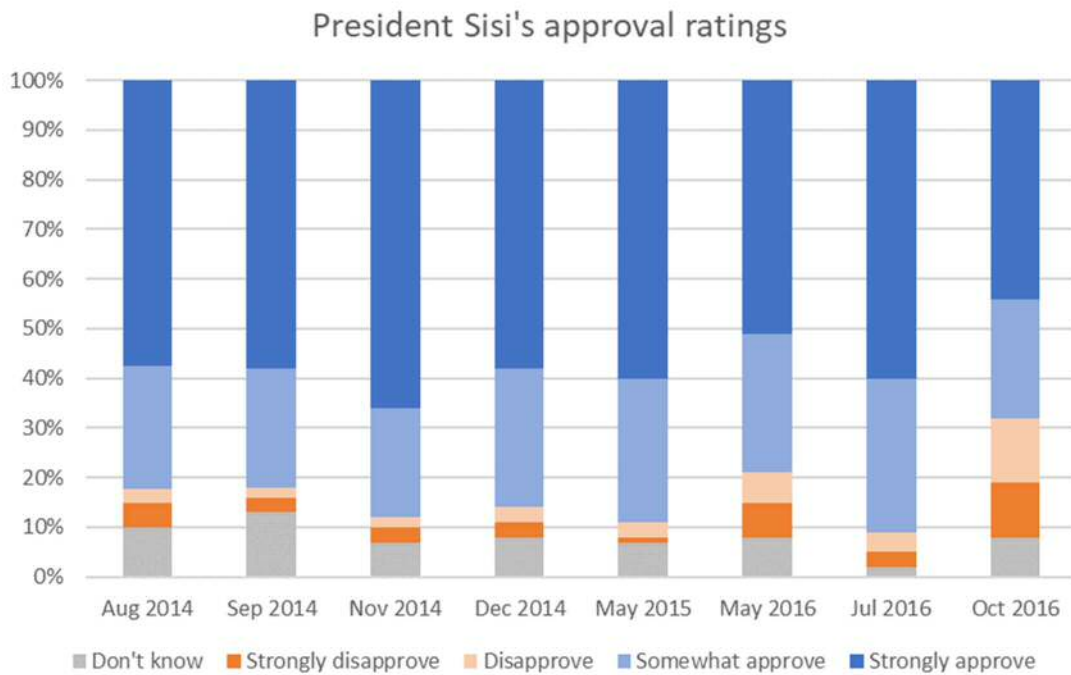
vaguely about his candidacy, saying that he would run if the Egyptian people wished him to do so.

This report will explain the current political environment surrounding the 2018 presidential election with the goal of contributing to the analysis of election politics in the future.

1. A slowly declining approval rate

If President Sisi runs for a second term, he is virtually guaranteed to win. However, it has been almost four years after Sisi assumed office, the administration has faced growing resentment, dissatisfaction, and criticism. The major reasons for the brewing discontent are rising prices and unemployment. Increases in electricity and gasoline prices, due to reductions in fuel subsidies, as well as shortages and rising prices of subsidized bread, sugar, cooking oil, medical supplies, and other daily essentials have imposed a heavy burden on people's daily lives. The inflation rate, which had stayed at approximately 10%, exceeded 30% just as the government moved to a free-floating currency in November 2016. However, men's average monthly salary in 2016 was 4,572 pounds (approx. 29,000 yen) in the public sector and 2,780 pounds (approx. 17,000 yen) in the private sector ([published by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in Sep. 2017](#)), neither of which is sufficient to support a family. A family with children needs at least 5,000 pounds a month to live a standard life with the current price levels. The unemployment rate has decreased only slightly to 12% after it peaked at 13.4% in 2014, and not enough job opportunities are available for people who want to work multiple jobs because of the low wages. Private media outlets have reported from time to time that people's dissatisfaction with the government has grown due to price increases. Further, the Sisi administration's popularity declined after it signed an agreement to cede its sovereignty over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia without public debate.

The following graph shows President Sisi's approval ratings published by a government-affiliated poll organization. In August 2014, when Sisi first took office, 83% of the respondents said they "strongly approved" or "somewhat approved" of Sisi. His approval ratings remained high, until the government introduced a series of price increases for fuel and electricity. The approval rating fell to 68% in October 2016, when the shortages of essential food products dependent on imports became a serious problem. Since the poll was conducted by a government-affiliated poll organization, the numbers cannot be said to accurately reflect Egyptian public opinion. Nevertheless, it can be said with certainty that President Sisi's approval rating has fallen over the last year.



(Source: Prepared by the author based on data published by Baseera, Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research)

2. Crackdown on opposition

Although there is no doubt that people are dissatisfied with the Sisi government as described above, his re-election is considered a foregone conclusion for three reasons.

The first is the government's crackdown on opposition candidates. At the time this report was written (Dec. 2017), three people had announced their candidacy for the presidential election. However, the chances of any of the three candidates winning are very slim. It is highly likely that they will face procedural legal problems with officially registering their candidacy and that they will not be able to secure enough support even if their candidacy is approved.

Khaled Ali, a leftist activist and prominent lawyer, has been an outspoken critic of the Sisi administration and announced his candidacy in November 2017. In September, however, Ali was found guilty of offending public decency and was sentenced to three months in prison by a first-degree court. In January 2017, the Supreme Administrative Court nullified the agreement in which the islands of Tiran and Sanafir were handed over to Saudi Arabia, granting a victory to the plaintiff, represented by Ali ([CHUTO KAWARABAN No. 159, Jan. 17, 2017](#)). It was alleged that Ali made a middle-finger gesture while celebrating the successful ruling, and a suit was



Khaled Ali

brought against him for engaging in inappropriate behavior. Ali criticized the verdict as being politically motivated and is currently appealing the ruling. The first-degree court issued the ruling without hearing the final pleadings by the defendant (Ali) or providing him with an opportunity to cross-examine witnesses for the prosecution ([Amnesty International](#)). If the guilty verdict is not reversed before the deadline for declaring one's candidacy, Ali will not be able to run in the presidential election.

At the end of November, **Ahmed Shafiq** also announced his candidacy for the presidential election. Shafiq served as Commander of the Egyptian Air Force (1996–2002), Minister of Civil Aviation (2002–2011), and Prime Minister (2011) during Mubarak's reign. Shafiq lost to Mohamed Morsi in the 2012 presidential election and later moved to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He has been seen as a critic of the Sisi government, having stated, prior to the 2014 presidential election, that he “will run if Sisi won't.” In a recording leaked to the media, he stated



Ahmed Shafiq

that the 2014 “presidential elections would be rigged in El-Sisi's favor,” [describing](#) the process as “farcical.” It was [reported](#) in May 2015 that government officials warned Shafiq not to run in the 2018 presidential elections. It is hard to imagine that Shafiq, who is deeply familiar with how the military operates as an organization, would announce his candidacy without its backing. It is, therefore, conceivable that there are opposing views within the military about Sisi's run for the presidency. Nevertheless, Shafiq's announcement of his intention to run at the end of November set off negative reactions in Egypt. Politicians and pundits criticized Shafiq for announcing his candidacy through Reuters and Al Jazeera, news organizations critical of Egypt's domestic affairs; for criticizing the UAE, Egypt's ally in “a fight against terrorism”; and for “escaping” to the UAE when Egypt suffered a series of terrorist attacks ([CHUTO KAWARABAN. No. 129, November 30, 2017](#)). How the government will respond to Shafiq and whether he will announce his candidacy will be watched closely in the future.

The third candidate is a man named **Ahmed Konsowa**, a colonel at the Armed Forces Engineering Authority who [announced](#) his intention to run on Facebook in his military uniform at the end of November. However, Konsowa appears to have been detained by the military police immediately after the announcement, and it is hard to imagine that he will be able to run.

Other names of potential candidates mentioned so far include **Sami Anan** (Chief of Staff from 2005 to 2012), **Hamdeen Sabbahi** (candidate for the 2014 presidential elections), and **Mohamed Sadat** (nephew of President Anwar al-Sadat and leader of the Reform and

Development Party). However, Sabbahi announced in September that he was not running, while Mohamed Sadat, who had been critical of the government's authoritarian rule, was expelled from the Parliament in February 2017 on the allegation that he leaked a new NGO bill to foreign embassies in Cairo. Sadat believes it will not be a fair election if he runs. "I know that I will lose, but I would still like to lose with honor," he said in an [interview](#) in June. Sami Anan, the former Chief of Staff, has not discussed his candidacy, but is reported to be a strong candidate with a military background who has won the deep trust of Saudi Arabia. His next move will draw a great deal of attention.

3. Parliament and voters

If we turn our attention to Egypt's Parliament and voters, it is clear that Members of Parliament and voters show a strong reluctance to express criticism of the government. An examination of the current parliamentary politics and citizens' political participation reveals that the upcoming presidential election has not generated any criticism of the present limits on political freedom or vigorous discussions on economic policy. Behind this absence of political activity lies a severe clampdown on criticism of the government.

(1) Parliament

Most political parties and politicians who ran in the 2015 parliamentary (House of Representatives) elections publicly announced their support for President Sisi. As a result, the Parliament was filled with supporters of the president, although they belonged to different parties. This situation has remained unchanged even to this day. At the end of July, several parties with seats in the Parliament, including the Free Egyptians Party, the Wafd Party, the Conference Party, the Constitution Party, the Conservative Party, the Homeland Defenders Party, and the Nation's Future Party, announced their support for Sisi's re-election. In October, the Chairman of the National Security Parliamentary Committee spoke of a plan to organize a campaign for Sisi's candidacy and re-election.

While liberal parties such as the Nationalist Progressive Unionist Party and the Popular Socialist Alliance Party criticize the government from time to time, these opposition parties have been effectively "tamed" by the government and avoid challenging President Sisi's competence in policy management. Because these parties only hold a handful of seats in the Parliament and lack a grassroots support base, voicing serious criticisms against the current administration could jeopardize their survival. As mentioned above, Mohamed Sadat, the leader of the Reform and Development Party, was expelled from the Parliament in February 2017, as a result of the government's crackdown on its opposition.

In other words, instead of checking executive policies, the Parliament has been relegated

to the role of approving them. Political parties in Egypt, therefore, cannot be expected to play a central role in creating a free political environment for the presidential election.

(2) Voters

Even voters appear to have held back in criticizing the government. Following the collapse of the Morsi government, Egyptian voters were split into two groups. The first group consists of supporters of President Sisi and forms an overwhelming majority among Egyptian voters. As mentioned above, Sisi's approval rating fell in October 2016, but the supporters still outnumber the opposition by far. However, the level of support for the president varies. Some consider Sisi to be the only leader capable of rescuing Egypt from its national crisis, while other less optimistic supporters are increasingly frustrated by the country's economic stagnation, but believe only Sisi can rule the struggling country. In the latter group, there is an increasing number of voters—particularly young voters—who are disillusioned by, and choose not to participate in, politics.

The second group consists of those who oppose Sisi and his administration's economic management, authoritarian rule, human rights violations, and anti-terrorism policies. Many of them are well educated and middle or upper class. They are common among young people living in urban areas, journalists, and human rights activists, but make up only a small fraction of all voters. When the Mubarak government collapsed in 2011, many voters were sharply critical of the government's authoritarian rule and human rights violations. However, with the rise of Sisi in 2013, voices critical of the government were drastically restricted. Sisi's opponents were seen as "unpatriotic" and were marginalized in society. They were subject to intense surveillance by the government, and some moved overseas to seek safety and freedom.

Sisi's opposition, or those who put priority on establishing democracy, regardless of who is in power at the time—whether it be Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the military—withdraw from political participation after Sisi took power. This is evident from a comparison of voting behavior among the electorate in different city areas (Cairo, Giza, and Alexandria), where many are reported to have voted against Sisi in parliamentary and presidential elections held since 2011. While the voting rates in the city areas during the 2011 parliamentary elections and the 2012 presidential election were ranked at the top or middle countrywide, the rates fell to the middle in the 2014 presidential election, held after Sisi took power, and then fell further to the bottom in the 2015 parliamentary elections. These changes in the voting behavior of the electorate in city areas are likely related to the pointlessness of casting a vote for the opposition party when the victory of the government was decided in advance in elections held since 2014, as well as the increasing risk of arrests

and physical violence by the security agency for criticizing the government. Consequently, they withdrew from political participation. Thus, forces critical of the authoritarian government have virtually disappeared from the political process since 2014.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above, the current political situation in Egypt—with a presidential election just around the corner—is characterized by limited opportunities for becoming a candidate in elections, low levels of competition in parliamentary politics, and a strong desire among voters to maintain the status quo. In this context, the probability of Sisi's victory, if he announces his candidacy, is extremely high.

The last question, then, is whether Sisi will announce his candidacy. The military, which is Egypt's *de facto* ruler, likely is motivated to prevent the political situation from becoming unstable as a result of holding presidential elections. The military's interests are to protect the national territories from terrorism, safeguard the military's power in political decision-making and its economic interests, and preserve its reputation as an honorable organization capable of protecting the nation and the people. The military, therefore, does not wish to see a candidate who challenges these interests. Its most desirable candidate would be one with a military background, and its options would be to either support Sisi's re-election or back another candidate with a military background. Sisi took office with enthusiastic support across all levels of society. However, after a series of failures in delivering anti-terror and economic policies and his decision to hand over the two islands to Saudi Arabia, Sisi ended up antagonizing the Egyptian people. One cannot exclude the possibility that the military would back another candidate with a military background, if it judges that supporting Sisi would not achieve political and economic stability. In other words, the military's intention will strongly influence whether Sisi will announce his candidacy.

In any case, whoever represents the interests of the military—Sisi or another candidate—is expected to win the next presidential election. Under the new president, steps will be taken to suppress and eliminate political discontent by force. Such approach to governance may, on the surface, achieve stable administration without opposing forces, but people's discontent may suddenly erupt through violence in the absence of a system that allows people to express their discontent by lawful means. The government will always be at risk of facing political violence so long as it continues to eliminate opposition by force.