

Egypt's Repressive Apparatus in the Age of Counterrevolution

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Introduction

It is common to assume that a counterrevolution restores the ancien régime. For example, Jamie Allinson defines a counterrevolution as “the closure, attempted or successful, of a revolutionary situation on terms favorable to the old order—in either its narrow political, or broader social sense.”¹ In some cases, this assumption needs to be scrutinized, including in the case of Egypt, which I explore below.

As the Egyptian counterrevolution prevailed, its leader, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, proceeded to build a completely new order, a “New Republic” or “Second Republic,” as he termed it. Some figures from the pre-2011 Hosni Mubarak regime might still be lingering around (though their role has only been getting more marginal day after day), but they now operate in a different playing field, with different rules, in a different game, and on terms that are not necessarily “favorable to the old order.”

I particularly look into how the repressive state apparatus was organized after the 2013 counterrevolution, which brought Sisi to power. The apparatus was fragmented before 2011, since its dominant perceived threat was a military coup. This dictated a specific *modus operandi* and structure to ensure the “coup-proofing” of the regime.

Following the 2011 uprising and the ensuing counterrevolution, Sisi built a new apparatus that is unified and tasked with facing the dominant perceived threat of popular unrest. Such restructuring is largely responsible for a change in the nature of the ruling regime and its *modus operandi*, most notably in the employment of state violence and its role in regime-making. The Egyptian example is thus crucial to our understanding of how these dynamics play out in counterrevolutionary moments across the region.

What Is Coup-proofing?

James T. Quinlivan defines coup-proofing as “the set of actions a regime takes to prevent a military coup.”² While the methods may vary from one regime to another, in his view they share some common features, including: (a) exploiting family, ethnic, and religious loyalties; (b) establishing an armed force parallel to the regular standing army, e.g., a militia, paramilitary organization, or 89militarized police force; (c) developing multiple independent security agencies with overlapping jurisdiction that monitor the military as well as one another; (d) fostering professionalism in the regular army; and (e) allocating the necessary financial resources for such measures.³

Researching military defections during uprisings, Michael Makara highlights “three coup-proofing strategies: building parallel security institutions, distributing material incentives, and exploiting communal ties.”⁴ Makara argues:

Parallel militaries do not necessarily need to be able to defeat the regular armed forces, but their ability to resist would-be military dissidents in defense of the ruling regime discourages coup attempts by raising the costs of military intervention. Additionally, security services, police, and intelligence organizations enjoy surveillance and intelligence capacities that allow them to monitor the regular army and uncover coup plots before they occur. Such forces almost always enjoy a chain of command

distinct from that of the regular military and an organizational structure that ties them directly to the political leadership.⁵

Large defense budgets, even in times of peace, and the prioritization of resources to security personnel are both effective methods of coup-proofing, designed to keep members of the repressive apparatus happy, which strengthens patronage relations. Moreover, “security apparatus personnel often have privileged access to a country’s best housing, medical care, and economic opportunities.”⁶

While studying the behavior of military elites during the Arab Spring, Hicham Bou Nassif highlights the most prevalent—and not necessarily mutually exclusive—strategies in the region, such as “counterbalancing the military through the establishment of parallel armed forces, promoting the material interests of senior officers, and fostering shared aversions between the regime and the armed forces.”⁷ Bou Nassif uses this framework to examine the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries during the 2011 uprisings, resulting in a resourceful and well-researched 2021 book, *Endgames*. His insights could well be applied to militaries in other parts of the world.

Another interesting coup-proofing theory is put forward by Sheena Greitens in her book *Dictators and Their Secret Police*. She argues that autocrats who want to stay in power face a “coercive dilemma” when they organize their repressive apparatus: do they fear a coup or a popular uprising? While it is natural that autocratic regimes would face multiple threats on different fronts simultaneously, the determining factor would be the “dominant perceived threat” when the dictator assumes power. “Autocrats chiefly concerned with the risk of a coup create fragmented and exclusive organizations,” she writes, “while autocrats most threatened by popular unrest create unitary and inclusive ones.”⁸

When coup-proofing is prioritized, autocrats create multiple security organizations with overlapping mandates, where information-sharing is limited or nonexistent, competition is encouraged, joint operations are not allowed, and *horizontal* channels of communication are blocked. The security sector is thus fragmented with no coordination mechanism, and all channels of communication are *vertical* in the hands of the autocrat. The apparatuses tend to be socially exclusive, refraining from recruitment from society’s wider layers, and restricting their membership to a group with tribal, ethnic, sectarian, or familial ties to the autocrat. Fragmentation and exclusivity, however, impede professional intelligence gathering, resulting in high levels of state violence. Such high levels of repression are further facilitated by the competition between the security organizations since each player wants to enhance its position with a higher body count and more “enemies neutralized,” and exclusivity means the target is the out-group, not members of one’s community.⁹

But when the dominant perceived threat is popular unrest, Greitens argues, the security sector tends to be unitary, with more inclusivity and a higher degree of coordination among its institutions. The level of state violence tends to be lower in that case, with emphasis placed on good intelligence gathering, inclusivity, and preemptive action. Such traits make the regime less likely to engage in indiscriminate violence.¹⁰ A central assumption in the above-mentioned theory is that the autocrat is a smart, rational thinker, who will not resort to violence if other options are available, since “violence has some cost—no matter how big, whether domestic or international.”¹¹

However, what is missing in the literature reviewed above is how a counterrevolutionary situation impacts the repressive apparatus’s structure, strategy, and dominant perceived threat

in ways that change regime behavior from the expectations highlighted here. Here, Egypt can provide some insights.

1952–2011: A Fragmented Apparatus

The institutions of the Egyptian repressive apparatus like to trace their lineage to ancient Egypt.¹² However, they are essentially the product of nineteenth-century state-led capitalist modernization by Ottoman Albanian military commander Mehmed Ali and his dynasty,¹³ followed by British colonization, which strove to control and restructure the police force and military in order to pacify the native population.¹⁴

But it was in July 1952 that the blueprint for the existing setup was structured and cemented, at the hands of the Free Officers. The new regime came to existence via a military coup by an eclectic group of nationalist midranking army personnel, in a fashion that resembled events in many other Global South colonies at the time.

The immediate concern of the conspirators was securing their new regime from similar counterconspiracies, in a region where coups had become almost a ritual. For instance, one Israeli study recorded, between 1940 and 1967, more than thirty coups and attempted coups in the Arab states.¹⁵ General Muhammad Sadeq—former director of Egyptian Military Intelligence (MI) who later went on to become defense minister—claimed in his memoir that coup attempts during Nasser’s reign were occurring every six months on average.¹⁶ Research also shows that coups are the most common method through which an autocrat unconstitutionally leaves office. Between 1946 and 2008, among 303 autocrats worldwide, 68 percent lost power through a coup, versus only 11 percent through popular uprisings.¹⁷

To protect the new regime, MI Lieutenant Colonel Zakaria Mohieddin—also known as “Nasser’s Beria”—structured a labyrinth of security agencies that counterbalanced one another with overlapping mandates. This is a classic coup-proofing tactic that has been adopted in many 91autocracies. Statistical research suggests that the likelihood of a coup success drops by 47 percent when counterbalancing is engineered among the components of the repressive apparatus.¹⁸

The newly founded agencies of coercion included: (a) *al-Mabāḥith al-‘Āmma*, the Interior Ministry’s General Investigations Department (GID)—renamed *Mabāḥith Amn al-Dawla*, State Security Investigations Service (SS) by Sadat in 1971; (b) *al-Mukhābarāt al-‘Āmma*, the General Intelligence Service (GIS); and (c) *Idārat al-Mukhābarāt al-Ḥarbiyya wa-l-Istiṭlā‘*, the Military Intelligence and Reconnaissance Administration (MI). The rivalry between them shaped Egyptian politics for the three decades before the 2011 uprising.¹⁹

2013: The Evolution of the New Regime

The 2013 military coup was spearheaded by officers who had seen Mubarak as too “lenient” with the opposition and his defense minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, as “weak,” who regarded the revolution as a “catastrophe,” and considered 2011 to be a “death certificate of the Egyptian state.” They were now in charge and decided to crush the revolution and stabilize the country once and for all.²⁰ What followed the coup was not simply a restoration of Mubarak’s authoritarian formula. The generals proceeded to establish a new regime, imposing

their direct rule, without civil society or any “broad political base” whatsoever.²¹ Sociologist and scholar-activist Sameh Naguib describes the mindset that prevailed:

The logic is simple: the old regime would not have fallen if it was not weak and had not been strategically flawed. If there was a chance to rebuild the class power that the old regime nearly lost, then new radical policies and strategies need to be put in place. If the old regime was too scared to carry out radical neoliberal reforms, then the new regime must be bold and go ahead even if it means major class battles. If the old regime relied on an implicit balance with the opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood, now is the time to destroy that organization and that balance. If the old regime was authoritarian but had its limits in terms of risking the use of violence, the new regime must not hesitate even if that means massacres. Many of the features of the new regime are shaped by that logic.²²

A Unitary Apparatus

Sisi sought to unify the repressive apparatus for the first time since 1952, to respond to the new dominant perceived threat of popular unrest. “The security concern now is the people, not a coup,” says historian Khaled Fahmy. “In the past the worries were always from a coup, which consequently led to the fragmentation of the state apparatus. In 2011, they realized that people are capable of a street revolt, so they have to prevent this from ever happening again.”²³ Sara Tonsy and Ali al-Raggal, who study the Egyptian military, concur. “Although the overriding anxiety of the security and ruling apparatus in Egypt since 1952 has been a counter coup,” they wrote in 2021, “Sisi does not appear to face much risk in this regard.”²⁴

Sisi has employed both a carrot and a stick to achieve his aims, offering material benefits and legal immunity to loyalists on the one hand, and purges to dissenters on the other. Such a process was engineered by a cabal of mostly MI officers around Sisi.

To ensure that a revolution would not happen again, Sisi methodically worked to bring all agencies under his centralized control and attempted to foster coordination rather than competition.²⁵ “The forces of repression saw a need for unity,” says Raggal. “They might have had intra-fights, but there was a bigger fight for survival.”²⁶ Hisham Sabry, a former SS officer, agrees. “Before 2011, there was competition between the security agencies,” he says. “Such competition ended after 2013.”²⁷

Following the coup, Sisi oversaw the creation of a coordinating body comprising the security chiefs. The MI, GIS, and Homeland Security (the successor of the SS) were now obliged to exchange all information they gathered. Horizontal communication was encouraged. The new coordinating body liaises between them regularly. It has neither an official name nor legal status, but has been unofficially dubbed *al-Khaliyya* (Cell) or *al-Lağna al-ʿAmniyya*.²⁸

This coordinating body has served as the administrative hub for a number of councils formed or reactivated after the coup, to guarantee coordination within the components of the repressive apparatus and with other state organs.²⁹ Unlike their predecessors under the previous regimes where joint councils assumed ceremonial nature or rarely convened, these councils have been holding regular meetings and coordinating policy under Sisi’s watchful eyes.³⁰

As he felt confident having secured his grip on the repressive apparatus, Sisi empowered such joint structures to act. “It is like what you saw in old battles, when the commander would yell

at his troops to ‘fire at will,’” says Hisham Kassem, a prominent pundit and a liberal publisher who founded the *Cairo Times* and *al-Masry al-Youm*.³¹ Once the repressive apparatus institutions were streamlined, Sisi proceeded to promote their control over all state organs.³² Just a year and a half after the coup, Muhammad Ibrahim Mustafa, the interior minister, confidently spoke of a “golden age” of unity and solidarity between the military, police, and judiciary.³³

“Nasser, with all his might, never managed to control the state agencies like Sisi,” says Fahmy. “The people have become the enemy. All the state agencies are now unified, and they are told ‘This is the enemy. Those are the people who want to destroy the state. It is in your own interests to stand against them.’”³⁴

These unitary structures include the National Defense Council, which in 2014 was given sweeping powers to oversee all matters related to security policy, just as it had been in 2012.³⁵ However, the new 2014 law on the council’s formation and mandate stipulated that the council had to convene regularly every three months, in addition to whenever the president summoned it or during a state of war.³⁶ Such insistence on regular meetings had existed in the original 1957 and 1968 laws,³⁷ but was conveniently ignored later. The council had rarely met or exercised authority, before Tantawi suddenly reactivated it on June 14, 2012.³⁸ The move at the time was opposed by human rights organizations, who denounced it as an attempt by the Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) to enforce military domination over the state before handing power to an elected civilian president.³⁹

With the 2014 abolition of the Upper House—whose head held a seat on the National Defense Council—the military’s dominance increased even more in relation to civilian leadership. The National Defense Council now consists of fourteen (rather than fifteen) members: the president, prime minister, parliament speaker, foreign minister, interior minister, finance minister, GIS director, defense minister, army chief of staff, MI director, commander of the navy, commander of the air force, commander of the air defense, and head of the Armed Forces Operations Authority (AFOA).⁴⁰ Although the Upper House was resurrected as the Senate in 2019, its head did not regain a council seat. Last but not least, in 2014, the National Defense Council was given the power to approve the defense budget, and to send the parliament only the budget’s total amount, without a detailed breakdown.⁴¹

Both the 2012 and 2014 constitutions included an article that tackled the formation and composition of a National Security Council to oversee policy related to natural disaster relief, food security, and economic crises.⁴² Though nominally civilian officials make up the majority of members, Robert Springborg explains that “the National Security Council was empowered by the 2014 constitution in such a way as to extend the military’s power over the cabinet and, by implication, the government as a whole [Civilian] key cabinet ministers are clearly included as a means to render them subordinate to the military core of the council.”⁴³

The council’s secretariat is organized by the presidency, which also controls its budget.⁴⁴ The 2014 law governing its work stressed that the council must meet at least once every three months.⁴⁵ In July 2020, the law was amended to stipulate that “in cases where the state, ... the preservation of its constitution, the security of the country and its territorial integrity, the republican system, the basic foundations of society and its national unity are exposed to imminent danger,” the National Security Council must meet with the SCAF, the president, vice president, head of the Senate, and any former presidents invited by the current one. The proceedings are to be conducted in secret. Decisions are taken by a majority vote, and all state institutions are obliged to comply. In case of a draw, the president has the deciding vote.⁴⁶

State Violence

Did the unification of the repressive apparatus, as detailed above, lead to a decrease in the level of state violence as Greitens proposes in her framework? There is hardly anyone outside the circle of the regime's staunch supporters and propagandists who would argue today that the state is "less violent" than under previous regimes. Does Sisi's Egypt prove Greitens wrong?

One must ask first how to measure repression.⁴⁷ Quantitatively, there could be some indicators, such as the number of state killings. For instance, the death toll from state violence on a single day—August 14, 2013—nearly amounted to the death toll of the entire 1990s decade of counterinsurgency under Mubarak. The Rabaa and Nahda killings that occurred on that day constitute the biggest massacre in Egypt's modern history.⁴⁸

During the initial seven months after the coup alone, state crackdowns and the ensuing violence left at least 3,248 dead, 90 percent of whom were civilians.⁴⁹ By the end of Sisi's first presidential term in 2018, the state "wars on terror and crime" had killed an average of two Egyptian citizens daily since the coup. During the same period, the courts sentenced at least 2,658 defendants to death.⁵⁰

"The regime that came out of 2013 is a war regime, which resorts to killing as the first choice for any crisis management or problem-solving," says Raggal. "We never had such rates of killings in our history. Egypt was never Iraq or Syria. This changed with Sisi."⁵¹ Other experts on Egypt make similar points. "The 2013 military coup ushered in an entirely new era of Egyptian politics that is marked with capricious state violence," writes Joshua Stacher. "Egypt is currently experiencing the most violent period in its modern history."⁵²

Quantitative methods, even at their most useful, still fail to provide context that enables us to fully grasp the nature of state violence. A qualitative look can help complete the picture. Holmes, for example, has a long list of "firsts" regarding state repression following July 2013; the list clearly demonstrates that the repressive apparatus has become uninhibited by old red lines, firing at will on previously unthinkable (or at least more carefully handled) targets, with unprecedented levels of brutality.⁵³

The post-July 2013 bloodshed has been central to the process of regime-making, as lethal violence, incarceration, and restriction of movement have become the default state response to all forms of opposition or criticism. Through violence, the new ruling class—which is largely composed of senior officials of the repressive apparatus, especially the military—has engineered a new relationship with society, based on the non-negotiable and total submission of the latter.⁵⁴ "State violence now reaches new and more diverse segments of society," explains Stacher, "including those that previously had been relatively secure."⁵⁵

The sheer scale of the post-coup massacres also sent a message to social classes, including workers, that independent collective action was neither welcome nor permissible anymore. While the country witnessed at least 4,567 industrial actions and social protests in the first six months of 2013, the number plummeted to 665 during the remaining six months.⁵⁶

The Second Republic was consolidated through counterrevolutionary violence that came in two waves after the coup. The first occurred during roughly the year following the coup, under the nominal presidency of Adly Mansour. The repressive apparatus went after the Muslim Brotherhood and any opposition groups that were capable of mobilizing nationally in the streets, including April 6, the Revolutionary Socialists, students, labor organizers, football fans known as "ultras," and independent activists. The crackdown was methodical, involving brute force—mass

arrests, killings, or the threat of extreme force against a group—usually backed by justifying legislation.⁵⁷

The second wave of counterrevolutionary violence was unleashed as Sisi officially assumed the presidency. The repressive apparatus cracked down on activists who could mobilize locally and went after any “independent activity” outside the direct control of the state, not just in the arena of politics, but also in culture, media, cyberinfluencing, and apolitical charities.⁵⁸

For the first time since the birth of the republican order, the repressive apparatus has fully eviscerated Egypt’s once-vibrant civil society. Sisi rules without a ruling party, an independent parliament, meaningful elections, or any dissenting NGOs. Opposition parties are destroyed or enfeebled. The increasingly militarized and securitized state organs dominate society explicitly and directly, without any buffers, unlike under the previous regimes.⁵⁹

Greitens assumes there is a cost to violence that makes it undesirable for the autocrat in the first place.⁶⁰ This was true in the case of Mubarak. State violence under his regime was generally calculated and was resorted to when nonviolent means of containing dissent had failed, to preserve the status quo. The SCAF’s violence during the 2011–12 transition, as brutal and bloody as it was, was still reactive and preservationist. Each massacre perpetrated by the repressive apparatus had a cost and threw the SCAF into crisis-management mode as it tried not to lose support among the public.⁶¹

But the calculation is different under the Second Republic. Carceral and lethal state violence have become Sisi’s default option. From July 2013 to 2022, Sisi did not *manage* dissent—he *eradicated* all forms of it. On countless occasions, the state was not even bothered about covering up its violence, including actions that were deemed “out of the boundaries of the law.” On the contrary, the ideological apparatus has boastfully published visuals of state violence, through newspapers, TV screens, and social media. The Rabaa massacre itself was aired live. Corpses of “terrorists” and “criminals” killed in “shootouts” flood both the official and unofficial social media platforms of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the Ministry of Defense. Despite the unification of the repressive apparatus, state violence has no inhibitions. This is not only due to Sisi’s personality, widely viewed as “ruthless and merciless,” but also because his regime is a war regime that sees itself in an existential fight.⁶²

“Excessive repression has become easy, and without cost nor accountability,” says Hisham Sabry. “The regime does not care about anything. The regime sees violence as the most effective solution that yields results. Sisi does not know any better. If you do not want to manage a political scene, the easiest thing to do is repressing the people.”⁶³

There is also a secondary element that may help explain the increasing violence: the counterrevolution was seeking revenge.⁶⁴ The repressive apparatus, especially the MOI, felt utterly humiliated by the revolution. Until the coup, police officers remained in a state of horror, fearing for their lives. Videos of brutalized officers during the Friday of Rage were widely exchanged within the ranks, building anger and stoking up a lust for vendetta.⁶⁵ After the coup, the police sought to regain their lost prestige.⁶⁶ “The [Ministry of] Interior wanted to kill and to make a comeback at any price,” says Raggal.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Sisi regularly refers to his regime as the “New Republic” or the “Second Republic.” And indeed, he is correct. The evolution of a unified security sector after 2013 marked a departure from the “First Republic” that was born in 1953; this evolution impacted governance, the state’s relations with civil society, and the use of violence.

The Egypt case does not necessarily prove Greitens wrong. Her thesis is valid regarding the coercive dilemma and its impact on how the repressive apparatus organizes as fragmented or unified. But when it comes to the level of violence, the simultaneous processes of regime-making and exacting revenge in Sisi’s Egypt have largely eliminated the cost of violence, since the bloodshed is perceived as necessary at any cost to repress the population and to regain the prestige of the repressive apparatus. Violence evolved into an essential mechanism for the survival of a state in a perceived war with the general population and under a permanent emergency.

The lessons drawn from the Egypt case can further our understanding of the actions of the repressive apparatuses in other countries that have gone through similar counterrevolutionary transformations. There is still ample room for more research into the subject, for example, into how such transformation impacts foreign policy, international alliances, the mode of economic production, and the prospects of future elite-led reform or renewed revolutionary upheaval.

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