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opportunities for change

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Egypt: Transformations and opportunities for change

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Introduction

Although more than seven years have passed since the outbreak of January Revolution (2011) – during which Egypt witnessed a series of major events that still have their effects and implications on our life up to date – yet any attempt to read the Egyptian scene and provide an accurate and updated interpretation of its developments remains an urgent demand to all those interested in the Egyptian situation and wishing to bring about the changes demanded by the January revolution.

While the January Revolution represented a real popular revolution against corruption and tyranny and legacy of decades of authoritarian military rule, it was also a rare opportunity to embark on a real political and social life characterized by democratic partisan rivalry, participation in governance, and removal of obstacles that had obstructed political and civil action for decades. Therefore, the new political and social environment that came after the January Revolution created spaces for political parties and civil society forces, as key instruments of political expression, public discourse, and representation of different sectors of the population, which was clearly demonstrated by establishment of various new parties and emergence of civil society institutions which communicated with the masses directly and immediately after their formation without any restrictions. This new environment provided a new Constitution, an elected parliament, and an elected president.

However, after the coup d'état of July 3, 2013 had aborted all the nascent gains of the January revolution, excluded most political and societal forces that actively participated in the revolution, and practiced violent violations and repression against

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political life, civil society, media, and economy; the Egyptian scene returned to a darker image than that of the Mubarak era. At the same time, authorities, represented in the military institution, continued to devote their view about the relationship between the army, the state, and the people: regarding Egypt more as an army served by the State than a State having a national army with specific tasks.

First, the current transformations in the Egyptian scene

The observer of the Egyptian scene since the coup d'état of July 3, 2013, to this very moment, can trace the size of change in the way of governance and the transfer from a direct military rule where Sisi represented the military junta and expressed their will to an autocratic dictatorial rule. In fact, this is a stereotype recurring scenario that comes after most coups (July 1952 coup as a model), where Sisi tended to concentrate power in his hands and tighten control over the military institution and security and sovereign services – much more than it used to be during the eras of Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, and even Gamal Abdel Nasser. Sisi has undertaken this transformation through several tracks, most notably:

1- Imposing full control and confiscation of political life

A simple comparison between the results and figures of the 2011 parliamentary elections and the results and figures of the 2015 parliamentary elections is sufficient to indicate the size of the change brought about by the current regime on political and partisan life. While the turnout in the 2011 parliamentary elections reached about 60% of the total number of voters, an unprecedented percentage in modern Egyptian history, however this percentage shrank to 32% according to the official narrative of

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the regime (and much lesser than this rate according to real estimates and through comparing the scenes of electoral commissions in the two cases).

While the 2011 parliament consisted of 95% of political parties and only 5% of the independents, the percentage of party representatives in the parliament of 2015 has decreased to 43% and the percentage of the independents reached 57%, indicating weakness of [political parties](#) and control of the regime through pushing independents to parliament membership under the auspices of different [sovereign bodies](#). On the other hand, referring to the extent of violations and repression carried out by the Egyptian regime after the July 3 coup against the political parties that were active after the January revolution, we would only point out that about 50% of the political parties that participated in the 2011 elections did not participate in the 2015 elections as a result of ban, repression and restrictions.

After the 2018 presidential election which allowed him to remain in power for four more years, Sisi moved to maintain imposition of full control over the political scene by attempting to bring together all loyal political forces under one pro-government party that could include more than two-thirds of parliament members; and at the same time gathering other political forces to form a pro-regime “opposition” front under the banner of one or two parties. In this regard, the New Wafd Party, a nationalist liberal party, seems to be ready to perform such role and lead the pro-regime opposition in parliament – as it has recently [invited](#) other political parties to merge together within the parliament under the umbrella of the New Wafd Party.

However, these parties, with all their orientations, remain under the control of only Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and his military intelligence instead of being controlled by various [sovereign bodies](#) as they used to be before (during Sisi’s first term in office). Amid the

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ongoing foreign criticism directed against Sisi for undermining and weakening political life, it seems appropriate to create a new political life characterized by strong party pluralism through the presence of a limited number of parties under the parliament, playing both the roles of the ruling party and the opposition. At the internal level, it would be appropriate to control the randomness of political parties, especially with the start of a new presidential term that is likely to witness constitutional amendments related to the extension of Sisi's term in office, as well as further adoption of laws and decisions. Also, Sisi needs a coherent political party to back him similarly to the National Democratic Party in the era of Mubarak, especially after all indications pointed to the erosion of his (Sisi's) popularity in the Egyptian street.

It is important to point here to another aspect of Sisi's attempt to take full control of the Egyptian political life, which was manifested in the actions and violations he and his regime committed before and during the 2018 "presidential election". The most prominent of these violations were the practices against all serious candidates in elections, including the imprisonment of candidates such as former Prime Minister Lt. General Ahmed Shafiq, Colonel Dr. Eng. Ahmed Qonsoah, and Former Chief of Staff of Egyptian Army Lt. General Sami Anan, as well as those who became desperate and were prompted to withdraw, such as Khalid Ali and Mohamed Anwar Sadat, who lost all hope in likely fair election under Sisi.

2- Security control, repression, and violations of human rights

Imposition of control over society using fear and terror is a policy that the regime has systematically adopted since the first day of the military coup against active and influential movements, institutions and individuals within the society in order to instill fear and humiliation and undermine any sense of human dignity or any desire to serve

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the nation and attempt to achieve the goals that the people sought in January 2011. The Sisi regime wanted the whole community to live in a state of fear and panic of being pursued by security services and thus achieve what some have called the “[Republic of Fear](#)”. The regime has not only used these practices but also sought to exploit the judiciary by attracting judges and enticing them with material and moral incentives for perpetuating and legitimizing the security services’ [violations](#). The main objective of this systematic process is to hinder the movement of the society and end its effectiveness, which reached its highest level after the January Revolution. Furthermore, Al-Sisi wanted to send a message that anyone who might attempt to oppose the regime, seek change, or even express his views in general will be exposed to such practices and violations.

I will just quote some statistics and figures that reflect the extent of the human rights violations committed by the Egyptian regime, where extrajudicial killings amounted to 3132 cases at the hands of the police and army forces during the period between June 2014 and March 2018. Cases of enforced disappearance amounted to 1290 during the period from June 2013 to August 2017 (Figures were collected from the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, for example, the Archives of Torture: For example, [Torture Archive – 2016](#) and [Harvest of Repression – 2015](#)), while the number of civilians who were prosecuted by military judiciary reached 15500 during the period from October 2014 to September 2017. The number of people who were [sentenced to death](#) was 800 persons during the period from July 2013 to January 2018, of whom 33 persons have already been executed.

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3- A full control over economy and people's needs

The regime has pushed the military institution to emerge not only as a military power center, but also as a considerable economic power center. Therefore, monopolies in the Egyptian market have shifted gradually from businessmen to the military institution which has devoured the Egyptian economy over the last few years, not only for making profits and achieving material gains to finance its military expenditure, or for the achievement of great personal gains, but also to impose control and dominance over the Egyptian economy and accordingly over the citizens' living. This was clearly demonstrated by the military monopoly of the basic needs of citizens (wheat, sugar, infant milk, etc.), thus allowing abortion of any protest movements through threatening of the creation of living crises and the suspension of people's basic needs provision.

Over the past five years, the economic situation affecting the vast majority of the country's population has deteriorated significantly, with [inflation](#) exceeding 22% in 2017, total [external debt](#) reaching \$ 82 billion at the end of 2017, and the [budget deficit](#) reaching 438 billion Egyptian pounds. This situation cannot be attributed to mere failure to manage the economy, or even simply as a result of the rampant corruption. In fact, there is ample evidence of a deliberate move to reach such situation with the aim of practicing “economic repression” against people along with the security repression, to exhaust their time and energy and thus undermine any demands for democracy or freedoms amid violation of other basic rights, foremost of which the right to decent living.

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4- Finishing off the middle class

Sisi realizes the role of the middle class in the vitality and strength of society, as well as its defense of public rights and freedoms, and thus its important role in revolutions and protests, and how it can be a lever for any real opposition demanding freedoms or seeking a change of the regime as in 2011. This pushed Sisi to adopt the policy of deliberately driving the middle class to poverty in preparation for finishing it off, or at least weakening it to undermine it completely. Accordingly, the middle class is gradually moving to the poor lower class that is exhausted in trying to meet the minimum basic requirements of living, excluding any interest in or demands of political rights, democracy and human dignity. This eventually almost led to the disappearance of the middle class as a major component of Egyptian society, depriving the whole nation of the most important elements of its vitality and efficiency. It is sufficient to point to the Central Agency for Mobilization and Statistics [data](#) late 2016 which state that 85% of Egyptian families spend less than 4000 Egyptian pounds per month, which is lower than the global poverty limit per capita (\$2 per person a day).

At the same time, the regime has been keen to support only a small part of the people to form a loyal middle from members of the military institution, sovereign and security bodies and judges, and was keen to secure significant advantages for this category so that it would maintain support for the regime, especially as their interests and privileges would be linked with the regime's remaining in power. Although this category belongs to the middle or upper middle class, however it is small and artificial and does not in any way represent a general middle class that is widespread in Egyptian society with all its social categories.

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5- Complete abortion of civil society and depriving it of power resources

Since its coup against democracy, the current regime has worked to impose full control over the civil society forces and organizations, which have become unable to function effectively due to the ongoing restrictions and the introduction of laws that restrict the civil work within Egyptian society such as the [NGO Law](#) adopted in 2017, with the aim of closing the public sphere and eliminating the active social state that was one of the direct fruits of the January revolution. At the same time, only the civil society organizations loyal to the regime were allowed to work freely and to monopolize charitable work through pro-regime associations only – not to mention the targeting and repression even before issuance of the NGO Law. For example, many human rights organizations have been subjected to ban and restriction, most notably the Egyptian authorities' [closure](#) of “El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence” and the move by the “Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies” to [close](#) its office in Cairo because of the increased security pressures practiced against it.

6- Binding and Subjugating Media and Press

After the July 3 coup d'état, the regime took procedures to subjugate most media and press outlets. Over time, the regime continued its method of subjugation and control through the [establishment](#) of the Supreme Council for the Regulation of the Media, the National Press Authority and the National Media Authority to impose more censorship of the media and the press with the aim of undermining the role of the Press Syndicate in supporting freedom of opinion and expression. The regime not only extended its control over the media and the press through the institutions it established, but recently it has sought to formulate restrictive laws for press and freedom of opinion through the Law No. 92 of 2016 on the Institutional Organization

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of the Press and the Media which was approved by Parliament in June 2018, as well as the purchase of TV channels by companies owned by or directly affiliated to intelligence services, and imposing full control over their administration.

7- Imposing full control over the military institution and security bodies

After Sisi tightened his control over the political, economic and societal scene, he moved to complete the course by imposing full control over the military institution after he was representing it in government, by gradually changing all commanders of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that existed within the council in 2012 and participated in the military coup, except for three commanders only which are still SCAF members up till now (Former Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense and current Chief of Staff, Lt. General Mohamed Farid Hegazi, Assistant Minister of Defense for Constitutional and Legal Affairs, Maj. General Mamdouh Shaheen, and Chairman of the Financial Affairs Authority of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Maj. General Mohamed Amin Nasr). The number of the military junta members that Sisi has eliminated so far is [33 military commanders](#), a traditional behavior expected in the wake of military coups. Sisi started to get rid of all junta members since the beginning of the coup with the aim of concentrating all sources of power and influence in his hands as an unchallenged ruler, after moving from a military rule to an autocratic rule after subjugating the military institution completely.

This strategy adopted by Sisi as well as his ongoing attempts to concentrate power and influence in his hands is the most salient feature of the regime's policy at this stage. Perhaps the recently issued Law on Treatment of Senior Armed Forces Commanders came as a direct result of Sisi's policy of getting rid of the military commanders that participated in the July coup d'état, which may have worried [former SCAF members](#),

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especially after several changes that included the Chief of Staff of Egyptian Army and father-in-law of Sisi's son, Lt. General Mahmoud Farid Hegazi, and recently Defense Minister, Lt. General Sedki Sobhi, that Sisi used to promote that he was immunized according to Article 234 of the Constitution of 2014, and after dealing with Lt. General Sami Anan, former chief of staff, in a way far from the traditions of the military institution (after Anan announced his intention to run for the 2018 presidential elections against Sisi).

It seems that the law was not intended solely to provide internal and external immunity for senior military commanders as much as it was an attempt from Sisi to calm down and reassure the senior commanders of the military that acquiesce to Sisi policies as opposed to those who act against Sisi's plans like Anan and Qonsoah. The law was also intended to provide a framework to control the way Sisi and military commanders would address their differences and potential conflicts and and at the same time maintain the coherent image of the military institution under Sisi's domination.

There were no great differences regarding the situation of security bodies. Since the January revolution until the July coup, it was evident that there was an apparent decline in the influence and control of the National Security Apparatus (formerly the State Security Apparatus) as one of the most important security services during the era of Mubarak. On the contrary, the influence of the military intelligence has increased and it even controlled the national security apparatus. However, there was a hidden conflict between the military intelligence and the general intelligence after the coup d'état of July 3. In attempt by Sisi to control the General Intelligence Service (GIS), he dismissed many of its senior staff ending with the dismissal of GIS Director Maj.

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General Khaled Fawzi and the appointment of Maj. General Abbas Kamel, the former director of Sisi's office and his closest military commander, as the GIS director; and reducing the influence of the general intelligence in a lot of important files that used to be under its control before.

8- Regional and international functional roles to secure external support

The Egyptian regime derives its strength from substantial regional and international support, regardless of all its aforementioned negative practices. In fact, Sisi gains this support through important functional roles that his regime performs in favor of the regional and international forces. In return, these forces are keen on keeping him in power in pursuit of achieving their own goals and [interests](#). The Sisi regime seeks ensuring its survival by acquiring external legitimacy through the services that it provides regionally and internationally – not necessarily in favor of Egypt's national interests. Sisi takes advantage of the double-standard policy of international forces which seek achievement of their goals and interests regardless of his lack of true legitimacy and his blunt practices and abuses.

Sisi has also taken advantage of the regional crises to perform roles that are in line with the interests of regional and international forces and secure external support, most notably the Egyptian role in the Libyan crisis, where the regime has provided political, military and logistical support to retired General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the so-called Libyan National Army, who is also supported by France and the UAE. Also, there is escalating security and political coordination between Egypt and Israel, unprecedented in the history of relations between the two parties. Also, there is a state of understanding and consensus between them to enable the completion of the so-called "Deal of the Century". Sisi also adopts attitudes that are in harmony with the

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policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in chasing and repressing figures of the Islamic current in attempt to undermine it completely. In return for these functional roles, there was clear complicity on the part of the international forces that claim adoption of democracy, with regard to the violations and practices carried out by the regime against the opposition and political activists. The role of the international forces was not restricted to remaining silent on the deplorable situation of human rights in Egypt, but it also declined to the level of almost participating in violations against political activists. The most prominent example of this is the recent detention of Dr. Mohamed Mahsoub, a former Egyptian minister during the reign of President Mohamed Morsi, by the Italian police at the request of the Egyptian authorities. This happened repeatedly in different situations, such as what happened with Ahmed Mansour, the well-known TV presenter of Al-Jazeera, when he was arrested by the German police at Berlin airport also at the request of the regime in Egypt, and the detention of Abdul Rahman Ezz, a political activist, by the German authorities at the request of the Egyptian regime.

Second: the future of the current regime in Egypt

In light of the above presentation, the present situation may highlight Sisi's control of reins of power in the short term, but the in-depth view reveals the fragility of the situation in the medium to long term, with respect to the tools that Sisi is currently using in imposition of his control, for several reasons:

1- Most of the manifestations of the regime's control do not rely on popular acceptance, which means that it lacks popular legitimacy that is derived from the people, and is achieved through the realization of the people's aspirations and hopes not by oppression, starvation and intimidation. All the sources of power on which Sisi

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depends in imposition of his control - other than popular acceptance - are volatile sources that can change under the influence of many motives and may spiral out of his control.

2- The latent state of anger that is escalating and widening within various sectors of society due to the deterioration of living and the bad economic conditions resulting from the tough economic “reform” decisions that are suffered by the vast majority of the Egyptian people, especially with the absence of any horizon for improving the economic conditions of citizens. The popular dissatisfaction toward the current Egyptian situation reached unprecedented levels that can, for example, be noticed on the social media.

3- The current regime tends to reproduce a scene that is similar to the scene of the last years of the Mubarak era, but in a darker way. The regime has adopted policies that could lead to a complete closure of the public and political spheres as well as the elimination of the effectiveness of civil society, which would, in the long run, increase the political and societal tension. On the other hand, the Mubarak regime adopted completely different policies (except for his last five years); as Mubarak used to leave room for political and societal movement to alleviate some of the prevailing tension resulting from the practices of dictatorship and autocratic rule.

4- The positive mental image of the military institution to the Egyptian people has deteriorated remarkably after the July 3 coup d'état. To many citizens, the military institution has changed from a national institution that protects the homeland and defends its territory into a repressive institution that its hands are covered with the blood and pain of the Egyptian people – as it seeks achievement of great economic benefits, performs functions and roles that serve the interests of regional and

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international forces regardless of the country's national interests, and cooperates and even allies with Israel in an unprecedented way. However, the negative mental image of the army to various popular sectors could undoubtedly arouse concern to members of the military institution, which would sooner or later lead to a state of dissatisfaction that could develop to a desire to return to the positive mental image.

5- In the long run, repression and violent practices and violations do not guarantee the continuation of the regime and the consolidation of its rule, as the fear and panic that the regime instills in the citizens in the case of being equal to the suffering of the poor living and economic conditions leads in many cases to internal explosions regardless of their forms or manifestations, but they pose a threat to the regime and may lead to its downfall.

6- The inability of the pro-regime middle class, including members of the military, sovereign and security services and judges to sustain and continue to obtain benefits for two main reasons:

a- The weak economic capacity in light of the continued decline in the state's capabilities over time, and

b- The diminishing of the state's social capacity to carry out its main functions with regard to the future of citizens, including members of this class.

7- Despite the regional and international support for the current regime, this support remains variable and unstable in view of the big transformations and changes - which has recently increased - and the continued changes in maps of alliances between the regional and international powers. This makes continuity of the regional and international support for the regime uncertain. In this respect, there are many examples for the abandonment of dictators after they complete their roles such as

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Shah of Iran (Mohamed Reza Pahlavi), Noriega in Panama, Pinochet in Chile, and even Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

8- The Arab Spring memory is still close and vivid, which represents the most important factor for change in my view. There are generations that have witnessed the events of the Arab Spring and are still dreaming of change, waiting for a favorable opportunity, not necessarily in the same way that the revolutions began. However, the genies that rose up simultaneously over the geographical expansion of the Arab region, cannot easily accept returning to prison, especially since the current factors of uprising may be much more than those factors that drove peoples to move in 2011.

Third: The role of Egyptian opposition

The observer of the Egyptian scene may expect occurrence of change over the medium term through two tracks:

- a- The path of 'Revolution of the Hungry' which leads to chaos, or
- b- The path of 'Rational Change' and correction of past mistakes.

However, excluding the scenario of chaos is logical at the moment, but it cannot be excluded in the medium and long term due to the policies of deliberate destruction adopted by Sisi and his regime. However, those who have a sound national sense must work to prevent occurrence of an uncontrollable state of chaos, because it may cause societal damage over an extended period of time, and would be difficult to reform. However, in my opinion, the political forces that believe in the January Revolution and the need for comprehensive change should pursue the path of rational change through two main tracks:

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1) Keeness on not repeating the mistakes of the January Revolution:

The political forces which aspire for a rational change must be keen not to repeat the mistakes that were committed during the January Revolution in which all parties were engaged, most notably the lack of readiness for a proper political transition in the wake of the revolution, which led to handing administration of the transitional phase over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Therefore, these political forces must plan well for the coming process of rational change through preparation of in-depth studies and provision of clear perceptions for a number of issues necessary for the peaceful democratic transition, for example:

a- The civil-military relations: which is the most prominent issue and the biggest challenge to any expected political change in Egypt in the coming years. This issue needs to develop clear perceptions to manage the relationship between the civil political elite and the military, taking into account the specificity of the Egyptian situation which differs greatly from the models of the democratic transition and civil-military relations reform which took place in more than one country in the past decades.

b- The transitional justice: the political forces concerned should develop a vision and provide appropriate mechanisms for civil society organizations and judicial bodies to enable them to achieve justice, realization of rights, and formulation of policies of accountability and national reconciliation.

c- Formulation of a new social contract based on achieving development and protection of public freedoms and human dignity.

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- d- Development of economic and social policies capable of achieving economic development at the macro level, and at the same time improving citizens' living and expanding the range of benefiting from wealth.
- e- Restoration of societal cohesion including all categories to end the state of extreme polarization with its different manifestations.
- f- Addressing the various issues of public policies starting with man building: values, education, health, etc. and ending with development issues and everything related to energy, food, housing and transportation.
- g- Financing the required development projects through combatting corruption, and then by mobilizing societal energies and resources: Waqf systems, strengthening civil society, expanding and supporting the middle class.

The aforementioned points are only the main headlines of these files which need combined efforts of researchers and politicians as well as those concerned in general to contribute to the formulation of ideas, principles, strategies, and policies for each issue.

2) Striving for change and benefiting from opportunities:

The current situation in Egypt cannot be sustained for a long time, given the rapid deterioration in all areas of political, economic, social and security life under the Sisi rule, which could lead to a state of violence and chaos that will be difficult to redress its negative impact on Egypt and the entire region in the future, as well as the continuous waste of human, economic and other resources, which will make it much more difficult for the future generations to restore Egypt's rightful status and develop it.

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In this sense, all the society's 'forces vives' must work hard to change the dire reality that Egypt is currently experiencing, in accordance with the methodology of rational change. This requires a number of important steps that should be taken, including:

- a- Making up for what we failed in, learning from our mistakes, and getting out of the state of despair and frustration of what is necessary in preparation for the longstanding battle.
- b- Unification of the political forces of Arab Spring and change at the level of the whole nation to confront the anti-revolutions forces as a cohesive unit that harnesses possible potentials as they face the forces of change as a cohesive group harnessing all potentials.
- c- Taking advantage of the relative freedom of movement of opposition forces abroad, which have not yet been invested in the best way required for the desired political change.
- d- Making cadres in all fields and not exhausting the capabilities of young people in continued daily living suffering.
- e- Investing the capabilities of opponents and resisters at home and connecting them to the external movement as much as possible, with distribution of roles and benefitting from the capabilities of anyone working to bring about the desired change in Egypt.

Conclusion

Despite Sisi's pursuit to concentrate power in his hands and his ongoing attempts to control the components of the Egyptian scene, yet this control will remain fragile as long as it is based on external factors and not on intrinsic factors of strong internal legitimacy that is based on real popularity. This hypothesis leads us to hope for and

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desire changing the miserable Egyptian scene which does not befit the status and history of Egypt. It also leads us to believe that hard and continuous work is the way to achieve this hope and desire, which must be realized by the anti-Sisi political forces with all their orientations and affiliations. In accordance with this realization, they must pursue several paths in favor of the likely present action and the future plans alike; otherwise, those forces would eventually be substituted for other forces that might be capable of initiating new projects and visions for bringing about the desired change.

