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A New Starting Point Toward National Action:

Introduction

Following media and parliamentary preparation over more than a year for proposals of constitutional amendments to allow Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to remain in power after the end of his current and final [presidential term](#)¹, the Egyptian regime has recently started to take concrete steps towards holding a referendum on these amendments that would keep Sisi in power for life, and consolidate the military's supremacy over political life in Egypt under the Constitution for the first time in Egypt's history. These proposals for constitutional amendment were submitted to the parliament's speaker by a group of parliamentarians, and the House of Representatives (parliament) agreed in a [plenary](#)² meeting on 14 February 2019 on initiation of discussion of these amendments and approving them. Finally, a referendum on these amendments is expected to be held next April before the beginning of Ramadan, Muslims' fasting month, as Yasser Rizk, Akhbar al-Youm board chairman and editor, has said.

Regardless of the ongoing debate on the constitutionality of the amendments and their violation of the provisions of the Constitution (especially those related to the due respect to the constitution and law, or even the legality of that Constitution in particular, being prepared in the wake of a military coup), but the real problem lies in the political path drawn by these amendments for many years to come, as they allow

¹ Egypt: Constitutional Amendments and Devious Routes-EIS-14 Feb. 2019

² 485 نائبا يوافقون على مبدأ تعديل الدستور، اليوم السابع، 14 فبراير 2019

Sisi to stay In power for life with new constitutional powers related to having absolute dominance over the judiciary, which means consolidation of the autocratic rule and concentration of power in his (Sisi's) hands. In addition, these amendments constitutionalize the military institution's hegemony over the political life through adding new provisions that mandate the army to preserve democracy and protect the Constitution and the State's civilian rule, an unprecedented move in Egypt's history. In this way, the amendments allow the armed forces to intervene militarily to overthrow the government at any time, under the pretext of protecting the Constitution. Although this has been the de facto situation in Egypt since 1952, but it is the first time to state such provisions in the Constitution. That is why various political and revolutionary forces reject these constitutional amendments although they have different political orientations. However, the common denominators between them remain strong in the face of this future path drawn by Sisi and the military institution. This study seeks exploration of the common ground that may unite the different Egyptian political forces and build a unified national stance, restore the spirit of joint action between these forces, and overcome differences on controversial issues that are difficult to agree upon, taking advantage of opposition to these constitutional amendments. This can come through mobilization of masses for participation in the expected referendum and voting "no" or through a positive boycott of the referendum, regardless of its results. Though it is difficult to imagine any outcome contrary to what the regime wants, however the momentum resulting from such a move could be a lever for wider popular movement in the future towards the desired change in line with the objectives of the January revolution.

In this context, the study seeks assessment of the two options of participation in the referendum or boycotting it through in depth reading of previous experiences, where the opposition adopted participation in the referendum and voting “no” (Chile 1988) or boycotting the referendum altogether (South Africa 1983). The study also presents an in-depth reading of the current Egyptian scene and attempts to explore the optimal stance, taking into account the present variables.

Reading of Chile’s and South Africa’s Experiences

The two experiences of Chile and South Africa in overthrowing dictatorships, resisting tyranny and restoring the democratic process are a rich material – for countries that suffer under authoritarian rule and seek liberation – to benefit from. It is significant to address these experiences in order to find an answer regarding the best path that Egyptian revolutionary forces and opposition should take in interaction with the upcoming referendum on the constitutional amendments, taking the specificity of each experience and its political, economic and social context into account, not only their results.

First: Chile ... The "No" vote Leads to Change of Regime

Chile's experience comes at the forefront of South America's democratic transition in the 1980s and it may have been distinguished from other experiences in resorting to ballot boxes to bring down head of Chile’s tyrannical authority General Augusto Pinochet. Thus, the Chilean experience provided a glimmer of hope for the usefulness of political action in overthrowing dictatorships.

Pinochet assumed power in Chile following a United States-backed coup d'état on 11 September 1973 that overthrew the democratically elected socialist President

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Salvador Allende ended civilian rule – the US Central Intelligence Agency incited Pinochet's coup and the administration of President Richard Nixon welcomed it.

In 1970 Salvador Allende was democratically elected as the first socialist president of Chile. Allende had remained in office for only three years when he was ousted by Chilean Army Chief General Augusto Pinochet through a United States-backed coup d'état on 11 September 1973, ending the country's civilian rule – the US Central Intelligence Agency instigated Pinochet's coup and the administration of President Richard Nixon welcomed it. After Pinochet assumed power in Chile, he pledged to eradicate communism and uproot it completely from the country. During Pinochet's years in power, Chile witnessed the worst periods of repression in its modern history and changed from democratic rule to brutal dictatorship. Pinochet continued to arrest tens of thousands of political activists, who were disappeared, tortured, killed, or exiled.

In 1980 Pinochet enacted a constitution giving himself an eight-year presidential term (1981–9). According to the transitional provisions of the 1980 Constitution, a referendum was scheduled for 5 October 1988, to vote on a new eight-year presidential term for Pinochet. Confronted with increasing opposition, notably at the international level, Pinochet legalized political parties in 1987 and called for a vote to determine whether or not he would remain in power until 1997. If the "YES" won, Pinochet would have to implement the dispositions of the 1980 Constitution, mainly the call for general elections, while he would himself remain in power as President. If the "NO" won, Pinochet would remain President for another year, and a joint Presidential and Parliamentary election would be scheduled. The result was a "no" vote of 55 percent and a "yes" vote of 43 percent. Although he was rejected by the

electorate, Pinochet remained in office until free elections installed a new civilian president, the Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin, on March 11, 1990, thus ending 15 years of military rule for Pinochet.

In order to explain how these shocking results of the referendum came under Pinochet's iron fist and Chile's repressive military regime at the time, we will explore the circumstances pervading during that period, and at the same time discuss the steps that the opposition and the resistance in Chile took in coincidence with the referendum:

Has international pressure played a prominent role in Chile's referendum results?

1- A new era of US policy towards Chile

In the mid-eighties of last century, the United States adopted a policy contrary to the policy that it had adopted before – of supporting the military rule in Chile. It was apparent that the new US policy towards Chile under the administration of President Ronald Reagan views Pinochet as an undesirable dictator and no longer appropriate for the US interests. The US administration then appointed a new ambassador to Chile, Harry G. Barnes, in 1985 to start implementing the new United States policy there.

Mr. Barnes's [mission](#)³ was to convince both Pinochet and his demoralized opponents that the Reagan administration would no longer tolerate the general's abusive grip on power. For three years, Mr. Barnes pushed steadily for political change in Chile —

³ Pamela Constable, U.S. diplomat Harry G. Barnes Jr., 86, helped end military dictatorship in Chile, The Washington Post, August 22, 2012

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opening his embassy to opposition leaders, standing up publicly for victims of repression and making it clear that he had Washington's blessing.

During Ambassador Barnes' first few weeks, he went to visit Gabriel Valdes [the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile under President Eduardo Frei from 1964 to 1970 and who was a vocal opponent of the military dictatorship] in his office. His gesture sent shockwaves throughout the Pinochet government. Not only did Barnes communicate with Chilean opposition figures but he took part in some protests and attended funerals for Pinochet's victims. The messages were clear and direct that the main role of the new US ambassador in Chile was to restore the democratic track and push for a return to civilian rule. In 1988, after 15 years of military rule, Pinochet was peacefully defeated in a national plebiscite and forced to step down as president in 1990, ushering in an era of democratic governance and economic success that has become a model for Latin America.

2- International criticism of the human rights record in Chile

During Pope St. John Paul II's visit to Chile in April 1987, he strongly criticized Pinochet's policy and [demanded](#)⁴ that he step down and transfer power to the civil authorities. The Pope went even further, calling on the Church to bring democracy to Chile. On the other hand, the United States had preceded the Pope in March 1986 when it strongly criticized the Pinochet human rights record and expressed inability to investigate many of Pinochet's cases of kidnapping and torture. The Pope's remarks and US criticism at that time were the biggest and most critical international criticism of Pinochet's

⁴ Kateryna Kurdyuk, PART I: From Dictatorship to Democracy – What did the '88 referendum bring Chile?, Chile Today, October 3, 2018

policies since he seized power and both were seen as one of the main reasons for highlighting Pinochet's abuses and practices.

3- US and international support for a free and fair referendum

The [statements](#)⁵ of American officials to the military government in Chile were clear and straightforward: “If anything happens to impede a fair referendum, the U.S. president would denounce it in the loudest possible terms around the world and none of this would be tolerated,” the officials in Washington told the military government in Chile on the 1988 referendum. The American threats were effective and prompted the international community to pay greater attention to the referendum and not accept any manipulation or non-acceptance of its results.

The U.S. administration continued to send direct strong [messages](#)⁶ to all members of Pinochet's military government against “failing to hold the referendum or allow any excuses for suspending it or nullifying its results.”

Impact of Internal Situation on Referendum Results

1- Defection within the Military Council

The most prominent and influential scene was the beginning of emergence of harbingers of defection within the military junta that appeared through tense relations between Pinochet and a group of junta leaders: General Gustavo Leigh, commander of the air force and Admiral Merino, head of the navy. Early when Pinochet called for a referendum, Gustavo and Merino [questioned](#)⁷ the legitimacy of the referendum and

⁵ Admin CoolBen, Chile's 1988 Plebiscite and the End of Pinochet's Dictatorship, ADST, November 2014

⁶ Peter Kornbluh, OSCARS: DECLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS TELL HISTORY BEHIND BEST FOREIGN FILM NOMINATION, "NO", National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 413, February 22, 2013

⁷ Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, Chile: Voting under the Gun, Nacla, September 25, 2007

the credibility of its results both at home and abroad. Furthermore, they said Pinochet did not even discuss with them when the voting process would start. Meanwhile, Pinochet tried during a meeting with the military junta to pressure them to grant him “extraordinary powers” to cancel the voting, but the junta generals refused and later appeared on TV admitting defeat. But it is not clear whether any of these generals had anything to do with external support in this regard.

2- Economic conditions created a beneficiary class and extremely poor classes

Despite the talk about an economic boom during Pinochet's reign, his adoption of a neo-liberal policy with a strong oppressive grip, achievement of a remarkable economic growth rates, and reduction of inflation rates, the reality of the Chilean economy after 15 years of Pinochet's rule, there were deep-seated problems related to increasing [poverty rate](#)⁸ to more than 40%, with a significant rise in unemployment rates. 1982 represented a pivotal point in Pinochet's economic policy, where Chile suffered a huge economic crisis: the GDP fell by 14% and unemployment rose to an astonishing 24%. Pinochet's economic policies have only achieved stability to a certain class while the rest of the Chilean people suffered greatly from extremely poor economic conditions, which was behind mounting internal protests.

How the opposition won the referendum:

The internal and external circumstances at the time of holding the 1988 referendum provided a glimmer of hope for the Chilean opposition – that the referendum could be held in an atmosphere of freedom and impartiality, to express the genuine popular will

⁸ Heraldo Munoz, Don't credit Chile's economic rise to Pinochet, The Japan Times, September 16, 2013

without any interference or manipulation in results by Pinochet and the military junta. But at the same time, the challenges facing the opposition before the referendum were complicated and intertwined, tracing back to decades of ideological conflicts and sharp differences in visions and goals. On the other hand, the process of motivating the masses to participate in voting on the referendum was a big challenge; as the middle class, which was the main popular incubator of the opposition was severely frustrated: it was not satisfied with the repression practiced by Pinochet, and at the same time it did not believe the political action practiced by the opposition over 15 years in the face of Pinochet was in any way fruitful.

How did the opposition in Chile deal with the 1988 referendum?

1- An alliance beyond ideology and politics

Opposition parties (16 left-wing and right-wing parties), previously stuck in a cycle of rivalry and protracted conflict, united in an alliance that put aside their ideological and political differences under the name: [“The Command for the No”](#)⁹. They decided to participate in the referendum and vote “no” targeting removal of Pinochet and the junta from power and restoring the democratic process.

2- Focus on the target

Above all, the opposition parties within the alliance sought to put aside their ideological differences and their conflicting visions on the post-Pinochet era, and agreed on their main goal, giving priority to ending the military rule and restoring the civilian rule.

⁹ Shirley Christian, FOES OF PINOCHET WIN REFERENDUM; REGIME CONCEDES, The New York Times, October 6, 1988

3- A different discourse strategy

The Alliance followed a new discourse strategy that was different from the social mobilization strategy, and started sending messages to two different tranches as follows:

- Messages to reassure their supporters that their votes in the referendum will be useful and that they can change the dark reality of Chile.
- Messages to reassure Pinochet's upper class and business supporters that they would not be imprisoned or exiled if Pinochet was to leave. These messages were intended to inform this group of the need to belong to the post-Pinochet world.

4- Reassurance messages to foreign investors

The opposition alliance leaders paid [visits](#)¹⁰ to the United States to meet with investors and businessmen and to reassure them that after Pinochet's departure, the alliance would be committed to maintaining Chile's basic economic framework without compromising foreign investment, while working to humanize the Chilean economy.

5- Receiving non-partisan financial support

The alliance has received material support as a pan-party body, where the United States provided \$ 1.5 million in aid to ensure that there is equal opportunity taking into consideration Pinochet's potential. These funds were directed to a national campaign aimed at re-registering voters in the voting lists that Pinochet had canceled before.

In the end, the opposition won the referendum and removed Pinochet from power, but the Pinochet era did not end with his defeat. The referendum did not end his influence or political role; as he retained his position as commander-in-chief of the

¹⁰ Admin CoolBen, Chile's 1988 Plebiscite and the End of Pinochet's Dictatorship, ADST, November 2014

armed forces for 10 years until 1998, which led to complication of the course of democratic transition for more than ten years after the 1988 referendum.

The 1988 referendum can be seen as the beginning of Chile's transition to democracy. Today, 30 years after the referendum, Chile is politically stable compared to its Latin American neighbors. At the same time, the impact of polarization on the Chilean society is still present after 30 years of the practice of democracy. Chile's experience from the 1988 referendum to the present, still gives [evidence](#)¹¹ that restructuring the State does not take place overnight, but it requires a deep-rooted structural shift that takes much longer time.

Second: South Africa – Resisting the Referendum ... Path to Liberation

South Africa has suffered over the past three centuries from the policy of racial segregation and apartheid that gave the white people of South Africa the right to rule the country and excluded black people from any political rights or representation. Early mid-twentieth century, the situation of the South African black aggravated after the growing violations and repression by the white authorities, which led to upholding unstable political conditions and pushed black citizens to the course of political action and resistance in the face of the white authorities.

In early 1983, South Africa's ruling party, National Party (NP), at that time called for a referendum on constitutional reforms that allowed only white citizens to vote. The new constitution sets a number of important changes in the political system, but it generally upholds and consolidates the political power in the hands of whites.

¹¹ Kateryna Kurdyuk, PART III: From Dictatorship to Democracy – What did the '88 referendum bring Chile?, Chile Today, October 5, 2018

Although the ruling party has over-promoted constitutional reforms as a prelude to curbing decades of racial segregation, the reality of constitutional reforms further entrenched segregation of the blacks and Africans from their societies and deprived them of any political rights. Reforms only allow the Indian and colored persons together with whites in South Africa to participate in the enactment of laws and legislation through a tripartite parliament of Whites, Indians and colored persons (Tri-cameral), with the veto¹² retained by the whites, while the blacks of South Africa remain completely unrepresented. The main problem in the 1983 Constitution is that it allows Indian and Colored South Africans to participate with the whites in the apartheid policy and puts them in common responsibility for laws that perpetuate and increase racial segregation and economic exploitation.

The referendum on the new constitution was held on November 2, 1983. Although the results of the referendum were in favor of “yes” vote by 66.3%, which meant that the tripartite parliamentary elections would be held in August 1984, the rally to boycott the referendum was a starting point for the blacks to restore their rights in South Africa, and a step in the path of liberation and access to democratic rule away from racial segregation.

A broad united front to boycott the referendum

The announcement of a referendum on constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling party has prompted a growing feeling among many South Africans that participation in the new constitution reforms would pose a serious threat to all races

¹² صدفة محمد محمود، إدارة التنوع والاختلاف - تجربة جنوب إفريقيا في التعايش السلمي خلال مرحلة ما بعد انتهاء نظام الفصل العنصري، مركز نماء للبحوث والدراسات، 2015

in South Africa and would deepen the policy of racial segregation and deprive the blacks of their political rights. In coincidence with the ruling party's announcement of holding a referendum on constitutional reforms, there were calls from opposition figures to form a broad coalition of non-racist civil associations, trade unions, student organizations and churches to oppose the new constitution. Hundreds of groups of all races gathered in a united front called the [United Democratic Front](#)¹³ (UDF). The UDF, which included many colored, Indian and a growing number of white citizens alongside the blacks, united together for opposing the referendum and subsequent elections to the tripartite parliament.

With the beginning of the establishment of the UDF, it was clear that its main goal was to reject the new constitutional reforms and the subsequent elections, but it was not clear how to interact with the referendum on constitutional reforms, whether by boycotting it or by participating to support the "no" vote. Some within the UDF believed that boycotting the referendum would be more effective, amid the differences and variations within the front, while others supported participation and voting "no". The UDF [decided](#)¹⁴ to ignore the referendum and did not adopt a specific position towards it, which was indirectly transformed into a boycott of the referendum and organizing anti-referendum activities and events.

¹³ J Brooks Spector, The UDF at 30: An organisation that shook Apartheid's foundation, Daily Maverick, August 22, 2013

¹⁴ The Tricameral Parliament, 1983-1984, South African History Online, March 30, 2011

The UDF's strategy in confronting the racist government

1- Various parties under one banner

While the opposition to constitutional reforms and boycott of the referendum formed the United Democratic Front, they adopted a major strategy in mobilizing parties, groups, and popular organizations, building on representation of all groups of people in different ethnic and political orientations, while excluding any group cooperating with the government of racial segregation. Through this strategy, the UDF [managed](#)¹⁵ to bring many organizations and groups under one banner to form an important part of the political landscape in South Africa in the 1980s.

2- Boycotting the referendum with mass mobilization

The move for boycotting the referendum in South Africa cannot be seen as a mere political act. Response to boycott of the vote included various activities and events, including marches, demonstrations, mass rallies, strikes, and boycott of universities and schools. The United Democratic Front adopted mass mobilization by launching innovative campaigns alongside boycotting the referendum. The UDF did not stop at boycotting the referendum, but it also called for boycotting the elections in 1984, which led to a voter turnout of only 20%. Over time, the mass mobilization strategy attracted huge numbers that joined protests, which was a real measure of the UDF strength and popularity that it gained in its confrontation with the government, despite the government's growing repression.

¹⁵ J Brooks Spector, The UDF at 30: An organization that shook Apartheid's foundation, Daily Maverick, August 22, 2013

Assessment of participation and boycotting

According to the two experiences of Chile and South Africa, and taking into account the specificity of each experience and its different contexts, it appears that there are several factors that have contributed to making interaction with such a referendum with a unified position, whether by participating and voting “no” or by boycotting, ultimately leads to changing the power or system of governance or constitutes a prelude to that. Among the most prominent factors relating to the regime are the excessive violations and repression, the social injustice practiced against citizens, the differences and divisions within the body of the regime, and the economic situation of the country, in addition to the external factors, including the support of international powers, particularly the United States, for changing the regime and the transition to the democratic process, and the criticism by international institutions and human rights organizations and world public opinion of the regime for the repression and violations it exercises against the people.

On the other hand, despite the difference in the way the opposition reacted to the referendum between participation and voting “no” in the case of Chile and boycotting it altogether in the case of South Africa, the steps taken by the opposition in both countries seem very similar. In both countries the opposition relied on forming a broad coalition of different factions, parties and groups that put aside their political differences and ideological convictions, making such coalition able to mobilize and mobilize masses for innovative activities and events to express rejection of the referendum.

In general, the reasons that led to the success of Chile's referendum are far from the reality of the situation in Egypt: as official international support for the Sisi regime is

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still great, and there have been no signs of divisions in the military at least so far, as happened in Chile. Therefore, the reality of the current Egyptian situation is perhaps closer to the reality of the situation in South Africa in the eighties of last century – although in the case of Egypt, there is no wide-range popular and international rejection of the repressive practices and violations of Sisi, as it was in the case of the Government of South Africa in the eighties of last century. Hence, the current situation in Egypt may be witnessing the harbingers and beginnings of a new phase in facing the ruling regime – that necessitates creation of a state of popular action and joint national struggle that goes beyond the fragmentation of the Egyptian opposition elites that has pervaded since the military coup. We can make advantage of these two experiences in the quest to open a new phase of national action.

How can Egyptian opposition and revolutionary forces interact with the referendum on constitutional amendments? And what are the gains they can achieve through this interaction, whether to participate and mobilize people to vote “no” or to refrain from participation and mobilize people to boycott the referendum altogether?

These questions may enable us to calculate the potential opportunities and challenges resulting from any of the two forms of interaction, taking into account the current reality of the Egyptian situation and the two experiences referred to above, which hopefully will help us in decision-making and in finding answers to the questions raised.

However, before embarking on this debate, it should be noted that each one of the two options is considered a positive action; different from negative boycotts, in the sense of indifference to what happens, either because of the illegality of the system as a whole (which is correct) or because of the inability to act positively, or because of

the fear of repression, or for any other reasons. In fact, this negative option has not proved effective during the past period under the full control of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on the internal scene, as well as the absolute support he obtains from the international and regional powers, in absence of appropriate alternatives. It must be clear to all that what the Egyptian revolution is missing now is the positive and unanimous action based on a unified national agenda that can unite the people around it to change its miserable reality, not just for defending a constitutional document that is not in any way respected by the ruling regime, regardless of any amendments that may take place.

First: Participation and voting “No”

The most important opportunities available through participation in the referendum and voting “no”, are those related to building a broad front or alliance that includes all anti-regime political forces with all their different ideas and attitudes, that is likely to constitute a strong and effective political opposition against the current regime in the future. At the same time, voting on constitutional amendments provides room for mass mobilization, albeit difficult under a repressive regime that terrorizes and intimidates its citizens. However, the return of citizens to ballot boxes for expressing their opinions (on rejection of the constitutional amendments), remains positive as it motivates citizens to return, participate, and interact with the political situation.

the importance of participation and voting “no” also pushes the regime to commit more violations with regard to a most likely referendum fraud, which contributes to highlighting its repressive practices at the international level. This factor represents an opportunity for the opposition and the revolutionary forces to announce participation in the referendum and demand international supervision to guarantee its integrity,

which will certainly be rejected by the Egyptian regime. This is likely to contribute to attracting more international attention to the repressive practices and violations of the regime and its failure to respond to the simplest guarantees of democracy. In this case, the international community will understand the opposition and revolutionary forces' stance of boycotting the referendum due to absence of any guarantees that make the referendum expressive of the true popular will.

On the other hand, there is a range of potential challenges in the event of participation and voting "no", most notably:

- Taking into consideration the current internal and external conditions, the referendum results are most likely predetermined in favor of the Sisi regime, which will cause a great deal of frustration that will be fed up and boosted by the pro-regime media. In this respect, there is no way to compare the Egyptian situation with the Chilean experience: Although the regimes in Chile and Egypt widely practiced repression against opponents following the military coups in both countries, the circumstances surrounding the Chilean referendum seem very different from those of the Egyptian referendum on constitutional amendments. In the Chilean experience, the U.S. and international supported the removal of Pinochet and ending the military rule through providing guarantees for a free and fair referendum. In the Egyptian situation, Sisi receives strong support from the Trump administration and European countries, particularly Germany, France and Britain, amid absence of any guarantees for a free referendum that truly reflects the people's popular will. Also, while there was division within the military junta in Chile, the present military junta in Egypt is completely pro-Sisi, especially after all commanders that could pose a threat to [Abdel Fattah al-Sisi](#)¹⁶ were dismissed (With the departure of Sedki Sobhi, the number of commanders dismissed from the SCAF reached 33 commanders, leaving only 3 commanders from the SCAF formation on July 3, 2013, when Sisi led a military coup against Egypt's first democratically elected president,

¹⁶ Mahmoud Gamal - What is behind dismissal of Egyptian Defense Minister? EIS – 2 July 2018

Mohamed Morsi, namely: 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 opposition's likely inability to mobilize the masses to vote "no", especially with the presence of many factors that can push citizens toward refraining from participation, most notably:
 - The nature of the referendum on constitutional amendments, which often do not attract the masses as in the elections;
 - The state of indifference and lack of interest toward any matter related to the political situation among a wide segment of the people;
 - Ignorance of the content of the constitutional amendments, the seriousness of survival of the Sisi in power for life, and the implications of consolidating the military institution's hegemony over the political life;
 - The illegitimacy of the regime already to a sector of the people who believe that participation in such a referendum means recognition of its legitimacy;
 - The lack of conviction of the usefulness of participation because there are no real guarantees for a fair referendum amid existence of a state of certainty in the referendum results in advance;
 - The terrorization practiced by the regime for any exercise of political rights.

These factors make mobilization of citizens to participate and vote "no" a great challenge. The opposition's inability to mobilize people against the constitutional amendments is likely to portray the anti-regime political forces as extremely weak, being unable to mobilize supporters to vote in the referendum. At the same time, this situation would give the expected referendum false credibility both at home and abroad.

Second: Positive boycotting

The opportunities of positively boycotting the referendum on the constitutional amendments are no less than those of participation and voting “no”. The positive boycott of the referendum must target formation of a broad alliance of all political forces with various orientations under one umbrella. At the same time, there must be mass mobilization of the Egyptian people to express rejection of the constitutional amendments in preparation for a new phase of national action. This requires organization of innovative activities and events to express rejection of the constitutional amendments and boycott the referendum, provided that those activities or events do not pose any harm to citizens including terrorization and repression by the regime.

However, the main challenge in choosing the positive boycott remains in its dependence mainly on activities, events, and mass mobilization, which is difficult to achieve at present in light of the severe repression practiced by the regime. It also seems difficult to compare the effectiveness of the positive boycott that was adopted by the opposition in South Africa with the current Egyptian situation, in spite presence of some similarities in terms of the authorities' exercise of repression and severe violations in both cases. However, the time frame in which the South African referendum was held was characterized by a state of sympathy among the peoples of the world with the rights of black citizens worldwide, and in South Africa in particular, amid a strong international rejection of the apartheid policy pursued by the authorities in South Africa. This international sympathy prevented the South African government from preventing the activities and events organized to face the constitutional reforms there. Although there are international criticisms of the regime's human rights

violations in Egypt, however they do not amount to the state of great international sympathy with the black citizens in South Africa. Accordingly, these criticisms would not pose any real restrictions that could prevent Egyptian authorities from repressing the peaceful activities and events opposed to the expected constitutional amendments amid international silence and even official international support, which could turn the positive boycott of the referendum in Egypt into a negative move and contribute to the continuation of political recession. Accordingly, the real challenge for all political forces that target a positive boycott or want to participate and vote “no” is to find innovative ways to mobilize the masses, whether for boycotting or participating.

But those who support the option of boycotting the referendum argue that in the end, the scene of the broad boycott will be clearly manifested through the scenes of empty electoral commissions, which can be marketed as a success for the boycott campaign. However, those adopting an opposite view believe that the coup regime is used to dealing with such situation as it used to do in the past, and has the experience to overcome it through its pro media.

Determinants of Consensus

Apart from the way of interaction with the referendum on the constitutional amendments, whether through participating and voting “no” or positively boycotting it, there must be clear determinants for consensus between various political forces in interaction with the referendum, taking into consideration that the targeted gain during this stage is to start forming a broad national front that would be commensurate with a new phase of national struggle.

Following are the most prominent determinants that could represent a common area to build on for expressing rejection of the constitutional amendments:

- No controversial issues must be raised at this stage in any way. Rather, unity on a universal goal is required: i.e. rejection of Sisi and desire for a comprehensive change to save the country from its current quagmire.
- Opposition to the constitutional amendments stems from rejection of the current political path represented in survival of Sisi in power for life, and continuation of the military hegemony over the political and economic life in the country for many years to come beyond the period of Sisi in power – not just opposition under the umbrella of the regime to protect specific constitutional or legal conditions.
- The consensus on rejection of constitutional amendments must spring from the above determinants, and not from only the desire to protect the Constitution, as the current Constitution remains subject of disagreement between different political forces, taking into account that the committee that drafted the constitution was appointed by the regime and did not represent the Egyptian spectrum, most notably the Islamists and revolutionary forces; and the Constitution articles that limit the authority of the parliament and its control over the army, police and judiciary. In spite of the fact that the [2014 Constitution](#)¹⁷ was drafted as desired by the regime, however the regime itself violated it and did not abide by its articles, most notably violation of Article 151 – which prohibits waiver of any part of the Egyptian territory [... In all cases, no treaty may be concluded which is contrary to the provisions of the Constitution or which results in ceding any part of state territories] – after ceding the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia.
- To ensure inclusion of all political, popular and societal institutions from all orientations without exclusion or conflict, as long as they meet the common goal of national action at this stage. Any obstacles to creating the required national state will lead to the continuation and even aggravation of the current situation, and the difficulty to change it in the foreseeable future.

¹⁷ EIS - Egypt: Constitutional Amendments and Devious Routes – 14 February 2019

Conclusion

It should be noted that the success of the Chilean and South African experiences, or any other successful experiences did not lead to the desired change except after several years of continued political action and national struggle. The desired change in South Africa and the end of the apartheid regime took place several years after the 1983 referendum. Also, in the Chilean experience, despite the removal of Pinochet from office as president, however his influence continued in political life, where he remained the general commander of the army for ten years after the 1988 referendum.

This requires full awareness from Egyptian revolutionary and opposition forces that the path of national struggle is so long, which requires joint action for conducting change based on a comprehensive national political project, in addition to maintaining contacts for obtaining international support and exposure of the oppressive practices of the regime. The broad rejection of the content of the proposed constitutional amendments can work as a new starting point for an effective national action setting aside all political and ideological differences.

The decision is ultimately left to the political and societal forces that reject continuation of the status quo in Egypt based on their assessment and accurate calculations. Political forces can start by adopting the option of participation and voting “no”, provided that the referendum is held under international guarantees for the integrity of the voting process. If these guarantees were not provided, the option of boycotting the referendum would be more effective.

Continuation of the current situation in Egypt without exerting any action by the opposition and revolutionary forces contributes to further complicating the scene and

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leads to consolidation of the existing regime and continuation of its repressive and failed practices, putting Egypt and the Egyptians at great risk. Amid the limited potential of the opposition and revolutionary forces, any unified national action may lead to partial successes on the road to change. The target now should not be restricted to participation in the referendum and voting “no” or boycotting it altogether, but political forces can also achieve some gains through taking a unified stance that can be built on in the future, as a step on the road to change.

