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How Egyptian Security Services Managed Corona Crisis

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With the outbreak of COVID-19 in Egypt, the military and security services have increasingly become involved in confronting the coronavirus at the expense of other government bodies, including the implementation and monitoring of the curfew, the provision of treatment supplies from abroad and transporting health care-related logistical supplies, the collection of information about the infected cases and monitoring their movements, and controlling dissemination of information on real numbers of the dead and infected persons, with the aim of controlling societal reactions and avoiding the repercussions of transparency with respect to numbers of victims that may highlight the failure of the health service system, and accordingly exacerbate the societal tensions and economic crises.

Egyptian security services and coronavirus crisis

On February 14, 2020, the Egyptian Ministry of Health officially announced the discovery of the first COVID-19 infected case¹; then Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly on March 24 issued a package of measures to confront the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in Egypt, most notably imposition of a partial curfew on citizens². Also, several government decisions were issued according to the directives of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi related to the halt of construction works for a period of 6 months and imposition of fines on construction law violators. These coronavirus measures placed more burdens on the shoulders of the security system that has become entrusted with overseeing the implementation of many precautionary measures as well as facing a number of emerging challenges, most prominently:

- The likely collapse of the health system, and its inability to meet the needs of citizens, which may lead to an increase in community discontent, and accordingly the eruption of mass protests.
- The likely worsening or collapse of the security system in the event of the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic among its cadres.

¹Coronavirus: The first COVID-19 infected case discovered in Egypt, BBC, February 14, 2020, [Link](#).

²9 important government decisions to confront outbreak of the Coronavirus ... most notably curfew, Akhbar Al-Youm gate, March 24, 2020, [Link](#).

- The decline of the State's revenues from tourism, remittances of Egyptian expatriates, the Suez Canal, as well as the slowdown in global trade and cessation of many local economic activities, which would lead likely to deterioration of economic conditions, social unrest and insecurity.
- The likely exploitation of the regime's preoccupation with the coronavirus crisis by some armed groups, especially in the Sinai, for intensification of their attacks and activities.
- The exploitation of the deteriorating economic situation and the deterioration of health services by the opposition media in inciting citizens against the ruling regime.

To face these challenges, the security system worked to exploit the coronavirus crisis in further tightening the security grip on society, through employment of the strategies that have been adopted since the 2013 coup to achieve the political goals of the ruling regime.

To do this, the security services have relied on the following practices:

1- Follow up of regularity of medical services

The Council of Ministers' Crisis Management Committee has entrusted the Interior Ministry's National Security Sector (NSS) and the Administrative Control Authority (ACA) to carry out daily inspection of quarantine hospitals, assigned with isolation and treatment of COVID-19 infected cases to ensure the regular attendance of medical teams, and to oversee the availability of medical supplies and medicines³. It is noteworthy in this regard that at least 6 doctors were arrested for criticizing the State's administration of the coronavirus crisis. Security forces also surrounded the Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS) headquarters on June 26 to prevent a press conference that the EMS had decided to hold in response to Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly's accusations of some doctors of negligence in facing the coronavirus⁴.

³ Madbouly instructs governors to carry out daily inspection of hospitals to ensure the availability of medical supplies, Al-Bawaba News, June 1, 2020, [Link](#)..

⁴ Arab Foundation for Civil Society and Human Rights Support calls for release of 6 doctors arrested for criticizing conditions in hospitals, Al-Masry Al-Youm, July 1, 2020, [Link](#)..

2- Acting firmly against any criticism of the regime's policies in addressing the coronavirus

The Ministry of Interior acted firmly against any criticism of the regime's policies in addressing the coronavirus crisis, regardless of being objective, which manifested in:

- Arrest of admins of any social media groups that are critical of the Egyptian government policies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The security forces arrested the admin of the WhatsApp group "Egyptian Mothers' Call of Distress" on March 14 from her home in Giza governorate⁵, under the pretext of spreading rumors about the spread of the coronavirus.
- Launching an arrest campaign against a number of media professionals working with Al Jazeera network in light of efforts to prevent the broadcasting and filming of videos critical of the country's health services. The arrests included producer Moataz Abdel Wahab, Al-Masry Al-Youm journalist Haitham Mahgoub, Coptic journalist and documentary film maker Sameh Hanin. The Interior Ministry released a video showing journalist Sameh Hanin while confessing what it called "the filming of videos against the Egyptian State for Al-Jazeera network"⁶. The Interior Ministry also dealt a blow to the media committee of the Muslim Brotherhood in Alexandria, by arresting 6 of its cadres after a raid on an apartment they used as a headquarters for editing filmed videos to be sent to opposition TV channels abroad⁷.
- Restrictions on the foreign press in Egypt, as the State Information Service (SIS) announced revoking the press accreditation of the correspondent of "The Guardian" British newspaper in Egypt, where the authorities asked the Guardian to publish an apology for its report on the spread of COVID-19 in Egypt⁸, adding that in the event of failure to respond, all available legal measures will be taken against the British newspaper, including closing the newspaper's office in Cairo and withdrawing its

⁵ Arrest of admin of "Egyptian Mothers Distress Call" WhatsApp group in Giza, Cairo 24, March 14, 2020, [Link](#).

⁶ Defendant Sameh Hanin: I produced videos against Egypt for the benefit of Al-Jazeera TV channel for \$150,000, Al-Ahram Gate, May 22, 2020, [Link](#).

⁷ Islam Hegazi of Muslim Brotherhood confesses, Al-Ahram Gate, July 23, 2020, [Link](#).

⁸ State Information Service: Press accreditation of the Guardian correspondent in Egypt revoked and the New York Times correspondent warned, Darb, March 17, 2020, [Link](#).

press accreditation. The Egyptian authorities also issued a final warning to the New York Times correspondent in Cairo for spreading false news about the spread of coronavirus in Egypt. At the end of March, the Guardian correspondent was forced to leave Egypt.

- Launching widespread arrest campaigns against previously released detainees and political activists to 'deter them from inciting citizens' against authorities. In April, the following persons were arrested: Alexandrian leftist activist Noha Kamal, daughter of Parliament member Kamal Eid, leftist activist Kholoud Amer, head of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's publishing department translation unit⁹, and the translator and leftist activist Marwa Arafa¹⁰. The arrests also included a number of activists on social media who wrote posts critical of Egyptian policies related to confronting the coronavirus crisis, such as political researcher Abdo Fayed¹¹. Also, the journalist Nora Yunes, the editor-in-chief of Al-Minassa website, where Fayed used to publish some of his articles, was arrested for one day. After her release, Nora wrote an article explaining that during his interrogation, Abdo Fayed was asked about his relationship with Al-Minassa website¹².

- Maintaining the policy of blocking opposition websites: On April 9, the editor-in-chief of the Darb news website, Khaled Al-Balshi, announced that the Darn website, affiliated with the left-wing "Popular Alliance Party", was blocked, about a month after its re-launch. By blocking the "Darb" website, the number of blocked sites in Egypt, since May 2017, have reached 547 websites, including 125 press websites. It is noteworthy that Egypt ranked 163 in the Press Freedom Index of 2019, among a list of 180 countries, according to the annual ranking carried out by Reporters Without Borders¹³.

⁹ Details of arrest of translator, Kholoud Saeed, from home in Alexandria, and taking her to an unknown location, Darb, April 23, 2020, [Link](#).

¹⁰ Marwa Arafa arrested from home in Nasr City, Darb, April 21, 2020, [Link](#).

¹¹ A week after disappearance: Researcher Abdo Fayed accused in Case 535 State Security, Al-Minassa, May 31, 2020, [Link](#).

¹² Norah Yunus, Charge: Administration of a website, Al-Minassa, June 28, 2020, [Link](#).

¹³ Blocking the "Darb" website ... a new blow to press freedom and the Egyptian left, Arabi 21, April 10, 2020, [Link](#).

3- Overseeing implementation of the curfew

In light of the fact that Interior Ministry enjoys possession of large numbers of forces and strong armament, it was assigned with the task of overseeing the implementation of the curfew imposed in the country, where the police arrested thousands of curfew violators on a daily basis, bringing the number of detainees in one day to 5 thousand detainees¹⁴, while the daily number of detainees was not less than 4 thousand detainees during May. However, those detainees are usually discharged after payment of due fines, which makes the arrest process a source of obtaining exorbitant funds as fines from citizens.

4- Suppression of any mass protests

The security services were keen to confront with utmost determination any popular movements related to the coronavirus, as dozens of people were arrested on April 11 in the village of "Shubra Al Bahou" Aga, Dakahlia Governorate, and accused them of inciting people to gather and try to prevent the burial of a doctor who had died of coronavirus infection¹⁵. In August, the Mansoura Criminal Court sentenced 42 people (almost half of them in absentia) to prison terms ranging from one to ten years, after they had been convicted in the case¹⁶. The ruling was aimed at acting as a deterrent to citizens to dissuade them from holding any protests. At least 20 people were arrested in the "Zaffat al-Kaaba" march (organized in celebration of the advent of Ramadan) in the Muharram Bey neighborhood of Alexandria, before they were released on bail of EGP500 each, where they had been charged with breaking the curfew.

5- Laundering the regime's reputation by arresting Tik Tok girls

Following the entry into force of the decision to close mosques and preventing worshipers to pray therein in April, the security services launched an arrest campaign against some girls active on the social media program TikTok, to show the regime as preserving ethics public morals in response to

¹⁴ Interior Ministry: 5,000 violators of curfew arrested within 24 hours, Mobtada, May 16, 2020, [Link](#).

¹⁵ Arrest of 22 residents of "Shubra al-Bahou" village for refusing to allow burial a female doctor that died of COVID-19 infection, Al-Masry Al-Youm, April 11, 2020, [Link](#).

¹⁶ Prison sentences from 1 to 10 years for 42 people accused of preventing burial of a doctor that was a victim of coronavirus, Al-Watan, 19 August 2020, [Link](#)

accusations against it after closing mosques for political reasons, not for the outbreak of the coronavirus, while the subway and other facilities with high human density were still operating.

That campaign began on April 21, 2020, with the arrest of a student at the Faculty of Archeology, Cairo University, Hanin Hossam, on charges of inciting “immorality or debauchery” on her TikTok account that is followed by about 909 thousand viewers¹⁷, then the belly dancer Sama al-Masry was arrested with the same charge, after a report was filed against her by the TV presenter Reham Said. In July, the Economic Court sentenced the “TikTok” girls, Hanin Hossam, Mawadda Al Adham, Manar Sami and three others, to two years in prison and a fine of EGP300 thousand, on charges of infringing on the family values and principles¹⁸. These cases were referred to the Economic Court due to its jurisdiction over information technology crimes.

6- Maintaining the policy of physical liquidation of alleged gunmen

Despite the coronavirus crisis, the police liquidation of alleged militants continued. In March, the Interior Ministry announced liquidation of 6 persons in the North Sinai city of Bir al-Abed. Then, in May, it announced the killing of 39 people in the vicinity of the city of Bir al-Abed¹⁹: where on May 3, it announced the liquidation of 18 people²⁰, and on May 23, it announced the liquidation of 21 others²¹.

7- Reducing the over-crowdedness of prisons by releasing criminal prisoners

To alleviate the over-crowdedness in Egyptian prisons, the Interior Ministry released about 19,000 criminal prisoners, based on 12 presidential pardons issued during the period from February 1 to August 31, 2020²². Only a very limited number of political prisoners were released at the beginning of the spread of coronavirus, most prominently 15 people²³ that had been supportive of the July 3,

¹⁷ Arrest of Hanin Hossam for “incitement to immorality“, Al-Masry Al-Youm, April 21, 2020, [Link](#).

¹⁸ Collapse, crying and fainting ... Hanin Hossam and the Mawadda Al-Adham after imprisonment sentence: We did nothing, Youm7, July 27, 2020, [Link](#).

¹⁹ Egyptian security forces kill 6 militants in Sinai, Russia Today, March 16, 2020, [Link](#).

²⁰ Egyptian Interior Ministry announces killing of 18 terrorists in Bir al-Abd, Russia Today, May 3, 2020, [Link](#).

²¹ Interior Ministry announces new details about killing of 21 terrorists in Sinai, Al-Mougaz, May 23, 2020, [Link](#).

²² Prisons Authority releases 4,011 criminal prisoners upon a presidential pardon, on the occasion of Egypt's “Sinai Liberation Day” celebrations in April, and then Interior Ministry releases 9,000 inmates in implementation of two presidential pardons on the occasion of Eid Al Fitr in May, [AlMarsad](#).

²³ We publish list of 15 people released from State Security Prosecution, Darb, March 19, 2020, [Link](#).

2013 coup, but later criticized some of the regime's policies, which caused their detention, most notably: Hassan Nafaa, Hazem Abdel-Azim, and Shadi Al-Ghazali Harb. As for the political detainees who maintain rejection of the coup and its aftermath, no prominent figures have been released so far.

The Interior Ministry announced suspension of visits to prisoners, starting from March 10, under the pretext of concern for the public health and safety of inmates in light of the spread of coronavirus. However, the Interior Ministry announced resumption of visits to prisoners, starting from August 22, provided that the visit is booked once a month by phone, allowing only one visitor to attend²⁴. These measures increased the suffering of the families of detainees, as it has become difficult for them to arrange group visits, where they share the costs of transportation (several families usually cooperate to rent a microbus or minibus with the aim of reducing the transportation costs for moving from distant places to prisons) as well as their social repercussions due to preventing detainees from seeing his family members after limiting the visits to only one person at a time instead of three, as it used to be. Deaths also increased among political detainees in light of the poor medical care provided to them in prisons.

8- Legalizing the powers of the National Security Sector

In August, the House of Representatives (parliament) made amendments to the Police Authority Law, the first of their kind, for legalizing many of the Interior Ministry's National Security Sector (NSS) practices that had been conducted informally. Among the most prominent of these practices was the NSS participation in setting security policies in the State and following up their implementation, which is considered a theoretical reduction of the powers of the General Intelligence Service (GIS), that is authorized to set the State's security policy according to the GIS law issued in 1971. The amendments also authorize the National Security Sector (to assist State institutions in facing threats by providing them with advice and security recommendations)²⁵, which legalizes the influence of the NSS over State institutions. The amendments also empower the NSS to monitor problems facing the State,

²⁴ With precautionary measures ... resumption of visits in all public prisons today, Sada El-Balad, August 22, 2020, [Link](#).

²⁵ Amendments to the "Police Authority" law awaiting issuance by Sisi after being ratified by Parliament, Youm7, August 24, 2020, [Link](#).

measure the public opinion tendencies, and submit reports in this respect to concerned authorities to take necessary steps towards solving these problems and containing their effects.

9- Tightening penalties for infringement of public employees

In August, the Council of Ministers agreed to increase penalties for assaulting public employees and wasting public funds, under the pretext that some categories of public employees, such as police personnel and workers in public health facilities, are more likely to be attacked by angry citizens. The issuance of this law reflects the increasing anger of citizens towards the government's public employees, which is manifested in the escalating violence against them.

Conclusion

The efforts exerted by the security services in Egypt were not aimed at addressing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in Egypt as much as they aimed to address the likely political repercussions of the outbreak of the pandemic in the Egyptian scene. In fact, this is mainly related to the legitimacy crisis felt by the Sisi regime, which realizes that its rule is based on coercion and not on popular consent, which makes it always feel threatened by the people.

Among the key indicators of the extent of legitimacy in a particular country: is the periodic selection of State leaders in a way that most citizens consider fair and impartial, with the existence of a high level of popular participation in political practices, which is not available in the case of the Sisi regime that monopolizes the political scene and bans any kind of real popular participation in politics.

To sum up, it can be said that the Egyptian security system has succeeded in confronting the challenges that it faced during the coronavirus crisis through the use of an iron security grip, consolidation of its control over society, and maintaining policies that are aimed at stifling the regime opponents or any voices that criticize its policies.

Although these security policies may have succeeded in the short term, but it remains a gamble, as the harsh economic decisions made by the Sisi regime along with the coronavirus repercussions have greatly accumulated the latent popular anger which is likely to suddenly explode at any time²⁶.



²⁶ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS.