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FIVE YEARS AFTER THE REVOLUTION, THIS IS EGYPT'S WORST DICTATORSHIP

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Five years after the first shoots of the Arab Spring appeared, the landscape in the region is bleak: Syria, Iraq and Yemen are torn apart by violence and sectarian hate, Libya is engulfed in chaos, and Daesh already casts its threatening shadow across the whole region. And yet, in no country is the gulf between the hopes raised during the first months of 2011 and the sad present-day reality wider than in Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt. The former military chief has established the most repressive regime in the Arab giant's contemporary history. Only Tunisia, cradle of the transnational uprising, has managed to stay out of these fires.

Sisi's government has taken the country back several decades, installing a rough approximation of the reviled Hosni Mubarak regime with its police abuse, fraudulent elections, demonisation of the Muslim Brotherhood and implementation of neoliberal policies. However, Egypt and the Middle East are very different places in 2016 than they were in the eighties. To seize control and hold on to it, the counterrevolution has had to use even more extreme violence.

In the past two and a half years, Egyptian authorities have arrested thousands of people from among the ranks of the opposition, hundreds more have disappeared – probably locked up in secret prisons – and more than 200 have died in police custody, whether through torture or medical negligence. Anti-government protests are banned. While the Mubarak regime tolerated the Muslim Brotherhood and never dared arrest its Supreme Guide, now the leader faces 40 judicial processes and has already been handed a death sentence. The activists who led the 2011 revolution, such as Ahmed Maher and Alaa Abd El Fattah, also now find themselves behind bars.

The brutality and impunity of the security forces has reached the point that all indications point to them being responsible for the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian researcher who disappeared in the centre of Cairo after being taken by police on the 25th of January, the fifth anniversary of the revolution. According to the *New York Times*, three different sources from the interior ministry have confirmed that Regeni was detained on that fateful day. A week later his body was found in a ditch in one of the capital's suburbs, displaying signs of "inhuman violence", according to the Italian interior minister. The authorities said at

first that it was a road accident. An incident like this would have been unthinkable during the previous regime, when westerners were safe behind an inviolable red line.

Regeni's murder may confirm the theses of various experts, such as Nathan Brown and H. A. Heller, that what is called the "Sisi regime" is nothing of the sort. The concept of a "regime" requires the existence of a strong executive power that the other state institutions obey, resulting in unity of action by public authorities. By contrast, today's Egypt more closely resembles a coalition of diverse institutions with wide scope for autonomy in the pursuit of their own interests. The presidency is certainly the most powerful institution, but it appears unable to impose its will on the rest, especially the interior ministry.

The recent formation of the parliament after three and a half years of absence does not seem likely to change the institutional set-up of the new political order, despite the extensive prerogatives granted to legislative power in the constitution approved in 2014. In fact, the coalition of parties that won last autumn's elections, which declares itself pro-Sisi, announced its intention to reform the constitution to strengthen presidential powers at the expense of the legislative. Thus, beyond the complaints of the few members of parliament in favour of democratising the country, the chamber is unlikely to become a centre of opposition to or scrutiny of the government.

On Egypt's confused post-revolutionary journey, 2013's coup d'état marked a genuine turning point. Consciously or not, Sisi opened up a Pandora's box by overthrowing Mohammed Morsi. Since then, a powerful and tenacious Islamist insurgency has formed that is no longer confined to the Sinai Peninsula, its traditional fiefdom, but is active throughout the country, especially in Greater Cairo. Within this insurgent fog, the group formerly known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, renamed Wilayat Sinai after swearing loyalty to Islamic State, is the most murderous. Its most audacious act, the downing of a Russian civilian aeroplane above the Sinai Peninsula, was a fatal blow to tourism in Egypt. State and terrorist violence feed each other in a spiral with no end in sight. Sisi promised order, stability and prosperity upon taking the reins of the country, but no Egyptian government has ever been so far from achieving those goals.

Although the evolution of each country shaken by the Arab Spring has its own particularities, it is possible to find a common narrative: the success of the counterrevolutionary forces led by the "deep states" seeking to put an end to the era of changes political Islam had managed to bring about. There is no better example than Egypt. The repression of moderate and institutional Islam has encouraged the jihadism of Daesh, which leaves the region facing an old and odious equation: traditional autocracies versus jihadist terrorism. Neither holds the solution to Egypt's pressing problems, and so the big question for the future is how long it will take for a strong alternative to emerge that is capable of forcing the "deep state" to make concessions.