

The Results of the Presidential Elections in Egypt in 2018 and of the Constitutional Referendum in 2019

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Introduction

The Arab Spring emphasized the importance of youth policies to ensure national security in North African countries. The top political leaders of Egypt learned the lesson from what happened and put the youth issues at the center of domestic politics.

Party creation, focused on work with the youth – the Nation's Future Party became the most important tool of youth policy. It totals about 250 thousand members and has offices in all 27 governorates of Egypt. More than 90 % of party members, including heads, are younger than 35 years. They take active part in public life of the country.

Tightening the control over the activities of non-governmental organizations became one of the main directions of the youth policy in Egypt. For this purpose instead of the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations N.º 84 of 2002 the Law on Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civil Work N.º 70 of 2017 was adopted (Volkov, 2018: 38).

National youth conferences became an important tool of the new youth policy. President al-Sisi took active part in their work.

Besides, much attention was paid to the solution of the main economic problems of the Egyptian youth: to a housing problem and youth unemployment.

These were the main directions of Egyptian domestic policy on the eve of the presidential elections of 2019.

Preparations for the Presidential Elections

In accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, adopted at the referendum of January 2014, the National Election Authority (NEA) appointed the next presidential elections in the country to take place on March 26-28, 2018, and for the citizens of Egypt living abroad – on March 16-18.

Long before the elections, a number of well-known Egyptian politicians announced their intention to take part in them. However, as their date approached, many of them began to withdraw their candidatures. They did so for various reasons – both as a result of official pressure and due to a sober assessment of their prospects against the background of incumbent President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who announced his participation in the elections.

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Among them were Anwar Essmat Sadat – the nephew of the former president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat; Mortada Mansur – chairman of the famous Egyptian sports club «Zamalek», el-Sayyid el-Badavi – chairman of the «*New Wafd*» party, who was widely recognized as a worthy opponent to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; and a veteran of Egyptian politics, a participant of the presidential elections of 2012 and 2014 – Hamdin Sabahi.

When the well-known Egyptian lawyer and founder of the «Bread and Freedom» party, Khaled Ali, refused to participate in the elections, it became a major focus of public attention. To support his candidature, the Democratic Civil Movement was created. It comprised 70 political parties and associations, as well as about 150 public figures (Hassanin, 2018).

His decision to refuse to participate in the elections came as a result of the arrest of another participant in the presidential race – the former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Egypt, Sami Anan, on charges of «*forging documents*».

In addition, the National Election Authority did not allow Ahmed Shafiq, the former prime minister of Egypt during the time of Hosni Mubarak, to participate in the 2018 election. Meanwhile, it was him who lost to Mohammed Mursi by only 1 % of the votes in the first round of the presidential elections in 2012, and in the second – by less than 2%.

After all these candidates left out of the presidential race, many Egyptian politicians began to rightly claim that the presidential election lost competitiveness and turned into a referendum. One of the reasons for this was, in our opinion, the overly harsh policy of the authorities aimed at «clean-up» of the political opponents of the current president, who, without any doubt, under the conditions of the ban on the activities of the *Muslim Brotherhood*, would convincingly defeat them in democratic elections.

As a result, at the last moment before the acceptance of applications from candidates for presidential elections was stopped, Moussa Mustafa Moussa, chairman of the «Tomorrow» parliamentary party, submitted his documents to the National Election Authority. It should be noted that the «Tomorrow» party, although not pro-government, works closely with the current government. During the presidential race its chairman highly appreciated the achievements of al-Sisi during the first presidential term. Therefore, supporters of the opposition parties stated that M. Moussa is a «*sham candidate*».

Some of them drew parallels between the participation of M. M. Moussa in the presidential election of 2018 and the much more successful participation, by the way, of his predecessor, A. A. Noura, in the presidential election-2005 as the only opponent of the incumbent President H. Mubarak. Those elections were the most disastrous in the history of republican Egypt, since only 23 % of voters took part in them.

In an interview given to the correspondent of the Russian newspaper «Kommersant» during the election campaign, M. M. Moussa, answering the question about the reasons that prompted him to take part in the elections at the last moment, honestly stated: «*When in the end no one dared to participate in the elections, I put forward my candidacy to avoid accusations of Egypt that we do not have democratic elections, but a referendum*» (Belenkaya, 2018: 6).

The provisions of Article 142 of the Egyptian Constitution require candidates for the presidency of the country to receive recommendations from at least 20 elected members of parliament or signatures of at least 25 thousand citizens who have the right to vote in at least 15 provinces, in each province not less than 1 thousand signatures in their support (The Egyptian Constitution, 2014). M. M. Moussa submitted 47 thousand voters' signatures in his support and approval of 20 members of parliament to the National Election Authority.

As for the current president of the ARE, A. F. al-Sisi, he gathered the signatures of 173,000 Egyptians in his support. In total, more than 24.2 million people, or 41.05 % of all voters, voted at the presidential elections in Egypt at 13,000 polling stations in March 2018. This is considered to be a rather high turnout in Egypt.

Results of the Presidential Elections

The high degree of absenteeism of voters in all Egyptian provinces, which requires deep political and sociological research, is a characteristic feature of the Egyptian political system. Even during the presidential election of 2012 – the only election in the history of republican Egypt, which took place in two stages and was remarkable for an acute political struggle, the turnout in the first round accounted for only 46 %. Meanwhile, exactly in the first round there were determined two leaders out of six candidates – Mohammed Mursi, who gained 25 % of the votes, and Ahmed Shafiq – 24 %. And only in the second round of elections between these two candidates, the first of which represented the *Sharia* principles of organization of the Egyptian society, and the second – secular, the number of voters (51.8 %) exceeded the number of absentees (48.2 %). As is known, Mohamed Mursi won the election, as he received 51.7 % of the ballots found valid.

On April 2, 2018, the National Election Authority announced the official results of the election: more than 97.08 % of the ballots found valid were submitted for the current President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and for his only rival, chairman of the «Tomorrow» parliamentary party Moussa Mustafa Moussa – 2.92 %. The highest percentage of voter support A.F. al-Sisi received in the province of Kafr El-Sheikh – 98.07 %, and his rival – in the province of North Sinai – 5.4 %.

As for voter turnout, it was above 50 % level only in three provinces: New Valley – 58.8 %, South Sinai – 51.7% and Gharbia – 51.0 %, and below 30 % level – in two provinces: Aswan – 29.8 % and Qena – 29.7 %. The percentage of voters turned out to be higher in Lower Egypt, especially in the rural provinces of the Nile Delta. Voter turnout was lower than average in the largest urban provinces: in Alexandria – 37.8 %, Cairo – 35.0 % and Giza – 30.4 % (Presidential Elections, 2018). In general, 41.05 % of registered voters took part in the Egyptian elections of 2018, compared with 47.5 % in 2014.

However, it is especially disturbing for the ruling authorities to see a significant increase in the share of invalid ballots, which serves as evidence of a protest voting. If in the 2014 elections about 1 million ballots (4.1 %) submitted were invalid, then in 2018 their number increased to almost 1.8 million, or 7.3 %. During the last elections, photos of ballots were shown on social networks in Egypt with the name of player of the national team Mohamed Salah inscribed on them as a candidate.

No doubt, some of the bulletins dropped in the ballot box were spoiled unintentionally but their share seems very insignificant. One can judge about their share by the results of the first round of the presidential elections in Egypt in 2012, in which 6 candidates participated, when the turnout reached 46.42 % and the proportion of invalid ballots – only 1.72 %. In the second round, with two candidates, these figures increased respectively to 51.85 % and 3.19 %.

It is remarkable that if the voter turnout in urban provinces in 2018 was lower than the average, the share of protest votes in them was significantly higher than the average. It reached its maximum in Cairo – 9.6 % of those who took part in the elections spoiled their ballots, 9.3 % – in Alexandria and 8.6 % – in Giza.

As for the provinces in Upper Egypt, in particular, Aswan and Qena, where the minimum turnout was registered, the percentage of invalid ballots was even lower than the national average – voters simply chose not to appear at the polling stations.

The convincing victory of the current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi at the elections in March 2018, who was first elected to this post in 2014, extended his term of office to 2022. At the same time, in accordance with Article 140 of the Egyptian Constitution, which unequivocally determines that the president is elected for 4 years and can be re-elected only once, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi lost the right to run again for this post. As a result, a dilemma arose before the ruling elite of Egypt: either to make a transfer of power in 2022, as required by the Constitution or to change the Basic Law once again (over the past 7 years it has been changed twice: in 2012 and in 2014).

The Constitutional Referendum

The problem of 2022, faced by the Egyptian authorities after the successful re-election of A.F. al-Sisi's presidency, was resolved unexpectedly quickly for most Egyptian politicians and foreign observers in a rather traditional way for African countries – by changing the constitution. According to the current Basic Law, changes in it can be initiated either by the president of the country, or by a group of deputies representing at least one fifth of the deputies of parliament. In case if no less than two thirds of the parliamentarians vote for the amendments, they must then be approved by popular referendum.

In accordance with this scenario, on February 3, 2019, a group of Egyptian parliamentarians presented a draft law on amending the Egyptian constitution to the Speaker of Parliament Ali Abdel Aal. These amendments, which provided for major changes in the Basic Law, affected the redistribution of powers between the three branches of power: executive, legislative and judicial.

After more than a month of discussion of this bill, on April 16, 2019, the parliament adopted the law amending the country's Constitution. The overwhelming majority voted for this decision – 531 deputies, against – 22.

The National Election Authority appointed a constitutional referendum in Egypt for April 20–22, 2019 (abroad – it was supposed to start and end a day earlier).

The positions of more than 100 Egyptian political parties in relation to the question put to the referendum turned out to be quite expected: a small group of pro-government relatively large (by Egyptian standards) parties supported constitutional changes, and numerous opposition parties that did not have sufficient wide popular support and, as a rule, their representatives in parliament, expressed unequivocally against.

Already on April 23, the National Election Authority published the results of the referendum, which could be easily predicted. Out of total of 61344.5 thousand voters 27193.6 thousand people voted, or 44.3 %. About 3.1 % of the ballots, that is, more than 831 thousand were declared invalid (a number of politicians urged to spoil them). Of the 26,362 thousand valid ballots in favor of changing the constitution were submitted almost 23,414 thousand, or 88.8 % of their number, and about 2,946 thousand, or 11.2 % – against (Egypt's constitutional amendments, 2019).

It should be noted that, no matter how hard the opponents of the current Egyptian authorities are trying to prove the opposite; the results of the constitutional referendum reflect the true mood of the country's population and correlate well with the results of the presidential elections-2018.

The first thing that attracts attention is the high voter turnout by the standards of the country, exceeding even a 41.0 % turnout during the presidential elections of 2018, which

was accompanied by a loud election campaign. This indicates, on the one hand, the greater interest of voters in the referendum than in the elections, at which they received the right to freely express their opinions, and on the other hand, it points at certain mistakes of the presidential administration in organizing the election campaign.

This right to free choice received at the referendum is also confirmed by a significantly smaller proportion of invalid ballots compared to the 2018 elections. If 1.8 million ballots, or 7.3 % of the total number of ballots, were considered invalid during the presidential elections, then in 2019 – only 3.1 % of the ballots, or more than 831 thousand. Thus, the majority of voters who deliberately spoiled the ballots during the presidential election clearly spoke out against the constitutional changes during the constitutional referendum. The Egyptian opposition can take credit for the results of the constitutional referendum. As a result of the referendum it was supported by almost 3.0 million voters, that is, much more than during the presidential election of 2018. However, this is only one part of the truth, because the government was able to attract even more supporters. If at the presidential election A.F. al-Sisi mobilized support of 37.0 % of all voters who had the right to vote, then the percentage of ballots cast for constitutional changes was 38.2 %.

Political consequences of the Referendum

First of all, the Egyptians supported the prolongation of the presidential term from four to six years, which shifted the time of the next presidential election from 2022 to 2024. Moreover, while maintaining the rule that the current president can be re-elected only once, a new transitional Article 240 was included in the Basic Law, which allows A. F. al-Sisi to put forward his candidacy in 2024 for another six-year term.

In addition, the new article 150 returns the once existed norm on the president's right to appoint one or several vice-presidents, and, importantly, the vice-president, if he takes office, does not have the right to amend the Constitution, dissolve parliament or the -government, as well as run for president. The rationale for the return of the post of vice-president, who does not have the opportunity to become a legally elected president, is quite obvious – increasing the resilience of the Egyptian political system.

Changes to the Constitution, approved by referendum, also significantly reduce the independence of the judiciary branch, strengthening control over it by the executive one. In particular, Article 185 gives the president the right, which he did not have before, to appoint, for four years, the heads of the judicial organs out of the five candidates, who are determined by their supreme councils. The Supreme Judicial Council, which was an independent body under the current Constitution, will now be headed by the president. In addition, if the Attorney General had previously been elected by the Supreme Judicial Council, then Article 189 grants the right to appoint him to the President. He receives the same right in respect of the chairman of the Supreme Constitutional Court.

Significant changes were made in the activities of the legislature. First of all, the bicameral structure of parliament is reintroduced: along with the House of Representatives, whose number is reduced from the current 596 people to 450 deputies, the Senate should be elected and is to be composed of 120 senators. The Senate is authorized to submit bills aimed at the development of democracy, the promotion of social peace and the realization of higher values, rights, freedoms and public duties, but the Prime Minister, his deputies, ministers and other members of the government are not accountable to it.

It seems that at the present time it is impossible to give an unambiguous assessment of the results of the constitutional referendum, which significantly prolonged the term of A. F. al-Sisi and strengthened the executive power vertical in Egypt. In the long run, these

steps significantly increase political risks, and first of all, during the transfer of power in 2030. In addition, the efficiency of the state apparatus, as demonstrated by the experience of H. Mubarak, decreases significantly over time, and the threats of corruption increase. However, in the short and medium term, the results of the referendum will contribute to the successful completion of the reforms initiated by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2014 in all spheres, and especially in the economic sphere.

In 2019 the three-year successfully realized structural adjustment program, agreed by Egypt with the IMF, ends. For its implementation the country has already received 10 billion USD loans out of 12 billion USD planned (IMF praises, 2019). In 2018, Egypt achieved certain economic success: the GDP growth rate was 5.3 %, and the public debt proportion to it decreased from 103.2 % to 92.6 % (Egypt – General government gross debt, 2019).

What ensured the results of the elections and referendum?

It should be recognized that the overwhelming majority of voters who came to the polls in March 2018 and April 2019 expressed support for the course conducted by A. F. al-Sisi, especially since the results of M. Mursi's short reign are still fresh in their memory. The overwhelming majority of the leading media outlets in developed countries tried to deny this fact – they covered the overall course and results of the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum in Egypt very negatively.

The active participation of young people in the Arab Spring once again reminded the current leadership of the country about the need to take into account the interests of young Egyptians and to develop an active youth policy. In addition, attracting young people to its side is the best way to increase the number of their active supporters over the long term.

First of all, in 2014, with the financial support of local businessmen, the youth party the Nation's Future Party was founded, which won 53 seats in parliament during the 2015 parliamentary elections. Its goal, with which it is successfully coping so far, is to involve young people in the political process on the side of the current government. It is significant that it were the members of the youth party who took an active part in collecting signatures (since September 2017) in support of al-Sisi's nomination for a new presidential term.

National youth conferences with the direct participation of the president became a new phenomenon in the internal political life of the country, not familiar not only for an African country, but also for countries that consider themselves democratic. They started with a meeting held in Sharm el-Sheikh in October 2016. In accordance with the decision taken then – to conduct them regularly 4 times a year, youth conferences were then held in Cairo, Aswan, Ismailia and Alexandria. In addition to issues of regional socio-economic development, acute nation-wide problems were also discussed at these conferences. The last event in this series before the presidential election was the World Youth Forum in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2017, in which, like in all regional conferences, the President of ARE, A. F. al-Sisi, took part.

It should be noted that the practice of holding national and international conferences and forums was continued after the re-election of A. F. al-Sisi in March 2018.

Another important direction in the struggle for the minds of young people in Egypt was the active opposition to the illegal activities of a number of foreign non-governmental organizations, many of which were created in Arab countries with the help of the West with a well-defined goal – to transform the ruling regimes they recognized as undemocratic.

However, the main front of the struggle to win the affection of the Egyptian youth – the main participant in the political process in Egypt – was deployed by A. F. al-Sisi in the sphere of solving the most acute economic problems: housing shortages and youth unemployment.

However, it should not be forgotten that the previous leaders of Egypt also paid attention to the housing problem: housing construction has been rather active for four decades already in the country. To this end, in 1979, the Department of New Urban Settlements was created in Egypt.

However, under the current president, the activities of the Department intensified. Currently, 24 new urban settlements are being built, and the total number of residential units put into circulation is 2282 thousand, of which about 1/3 are built by the Department and 2/3 by the private sector and the army. In Egypt, a program is underway to build 1 million social housing units ranging from 75 to 90 square meters for young people and people with limited incomes. To date, the Department has completed construction of 141 thousand social housing units (88 thousand are under construction), another 90 thousand were built by the private sector and the army (81 thousand under construction). Already today, 7 million people live in the new urban settlements, and after all construction projects are completed, the number of new settlers, mostly young people, should increase to 17 million (New Urban Communities, 2019).

However, the construction of cheap housing is just one side of the solution to the housing problem for young people, who often do not have the means to purchase it.

In order to provide it with such an opportunity, in 2014 the Central Bank of Egypt decided to allocate 10 billion Egyptian pounds to Egyptian banks participating in the mortgage lending program. These funds were intended only for banks providing mortgage loans with a maturity of 20 years at an interest rate of 5 % for low-income families (below 1,400 Egyptian pounds a month) and at 8 % – for families with average income. At the same time the advance payment was only 12 thousand Egyptian pounds. In 2017, 14 of the 39 banks operating in Egypt participated in this program of the Central Bank of Egypt, and over the 3 years of this program, they provided 5 billion pounds to finance the purchase of 62 thousand housing units (Mounir, 2017). These are, of course, quite modest figures, but, nevertheless, they can be considered as a definite step towards the alleviation of the housing problem of young people.

Even more obvious were the successes of the country's leadership in solving the problem of unemployment, especially against the background of the failure caused by the events of the Arab spring. If in 2010 the number of unemployed in Egypt jumped by 800 thousand people, having increased from 2.4 to 3.2 million, and in the next two years it grew annually by 200 thousand people, then since 2013 the number of unemployed has stabilized while employment grew. Since 2013, when the overall unemployment rate was 13.15 %, it has a steady tendency for a slow decline, although the situation with youth unemployment is not so simple.

The level of unemployment in Egypt (in %) in 2010-2017

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
General unemployment	11,85	11,85	12,6	13,15	13,1	13,05	12,41	12,08
Youth unemployment	28,76	30,07	35,61	35,63	34,12	34,89	34,62	34,43

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/377343/unemployment-rate-in-egypt/>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811968/youth-unemployment-rate-in-egypt/>.

According to preliminary data, the situation with respect to general unemployment was successfully reversed in 2018, when it was 10.9 % (Egypt – Unemployment rate, 2019). It can be assumed that youth unemployment in Egypt in 2018 will also decrease by at least 1.0-1.5 percentage points.

At the same time, it should be noted that the economic situation of the country remains difficult, despite the fact that the economic growth rate is more than 4 % a year and that the unemployment rate decreased. The structural economic reform carried out in the country under an agreement with the IMF led to a sharp jump in inflation as a result of the liberalization of the Egyptian pound in 2016 and a sharp reduction in fuel subsidies. This caused a surge in inflation in the country, which reached a maximum of 35.3 % in July 2017. The food price inflation, exceeding 23.5 % in 2017, is especially painful for the Egyptians. However, as a result of tightened monetary policy, the inflation rate was significantly lowered by the end of 2017, and already in January 2018 the level of core inflation was 14.4 %. However, it should be noted that the rapid growth of prices in 2016-2017 didn't cause anything like 1977 bread riots.

The share of the population living below the poverty line, the criteria for which each country sets independently, is high, according to the World Bank. In 2015, it was 27.8 %. In the same year, the share of Egyptians with daily incomes less than \$ 1.9 (extreme poverty) was 1.3 %, \$ 3.2 (moderate poverty) – 16.1 % and \$ 5.5 – 61.9%. However paradoxical it may seem, despite the economic upheavals caused by the Arab spring, the fight against poverty in 2010-2015 has seen certain progress, since in 2010 these figures were as follows: 3.0 %, 26.6 % and 72.5 % (Egypt – Poverty gap, 2019).

Thus, during the first presidential term of al-Sisi, some success was achieved in solving the most acute social problems. This, in particular, acknowledged M. M. Moussa, who stated the following: «I understand that I am competing with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has achieved a lot, roads, bridges, weapons – and all this benefits us» (Belenkaya, 2018: 6).

Conclusion

Thus, the outcomes of the presidential elections in Egypt in 2018 and of the constitutional referendum of 2019 appeared as a result of two main factors:

- active youth policy of al-Sisi, which was in many respects innovative for the African continent and led to the improvement of the youth economic and social situation in comparison with those in Mursi's times;
- dissociation of his political opponents, each of whom has no great influence within the political space which is strictly controlled by the authorities.

The main result of the constitutional referendum has become the strengthening of the executive power vertical in the country for the medium term. However, policy risks increased in the long term. In case if the Egyptian elite is split, then the transfer of power in 2030 or later will cause great threats, considering the changed psychology of the present generation of Egyptians who have the experience of overthrowing Hosni Mubarak and Mohammed Morsi.

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