EGYPT GOES BACK TO THE POLLS

Editorial | James Moran

President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, to no-one’s surprise, announced on January 19th that he would run for a second, and according to the Egyptian constitution, final four year term in his country’s upcoming presidential election, scheduled for March 26-28th. Nominations closed on January 29th, and only one other candidate, Moussa Mustafa Moussa, leader of the Ghad party, will oppose him. He has very limited support and next to no chance of winning.

Four other candidates who would probably have made the race more interesting, not to mention credible, are out of the running. One of these was Sami Anan, a former military chief of staff who had announced a run but was subsequently arrested on charges of violating procedures covering activities of ex-military staff, and disqualified. And the other three candidates withdrew: Ahmed Shafiq, a former Mubarak-era Prime Minister who ran a close race against the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi in the 2012 election; Khaled Ali, a lawyer and activist who ran against Mubarak in 2005; and Mohammed Anwar Sadat, head of the Reform and Development party, nephew of the late President Sadat, and until his ejection from the Legislature last year, one of the country’s most prominent liberal parliamentarians.

Why these withdrawals? In Shafiq’s case, it is unclear, although there has been speculation that he intended to run following his return from a five-year exile in Dubai last November, but was pressured to pull out or face a host of corruption charges. Khaled Ali cited intimidation and arrests of his supporters.

Sadat’s reasons are on the public record and worth recalling, however, for they give some insight into the current political environment in the country. In a press release put out in January, he cited three main reasons for withdrawing from the race: unjustified State media attacks on him and other opposition figures; campaigns by officials before the opening of nominations to collect signatures from government employees in support of the President, a violation of electoral procedure; and the concern that his supporters might run the risk of prosecution if the vote is held under the current emergency and protest laws. Sadat added that he did not wish to be a ‘token’ candidate, given these conditions.

The problem with elections
These developments highlight the main problem with elections in Egypt, which concerns not so much the electoral procedures themselves, but the restrictive environment in which they are conducted.

This is not new. In the last presidential election, the EU’s electoral observation mission (EOM), which was the first to be deployed in the country, found (albeit in the situation that prevented it from carrying out its mandate in full) that while there were no major violations on the days of the vote, which were ‘calm and peaceful’, the outcome had been prejudiced by the lack of a level playing field in the run-up to the ballot.

Among other things, the mission cited "unreasonable curbs" on demonstrations and a failure to respect due process and the right to a fair trial, notably as concerned hundreds of death sentences meted out at mass trials of Islamists in the months before the vote that had sparked generalised fear for the protection of human rights, and insufficient campaign finance regulation, which had favoured the Sisi candidature.

The EOM also criticised the last-minute announcement of an unforeseen third day of voting, which caused ‘unnecessary uncertainty’ in the whole process. At the time, there were widely held suspicions that this was done in order to increase the turnout, which had been rather disappointing. In the event, Sisi won with 97% of the vote on a turnout of 47%.

The mission also produced a series of recommendations for improvement of the electoral process, most of which have not been implemented.

That said, the security situation in the country is still rather fragile. Recent terrorist outrages include over 300 killed in an ISIS-backed attack on a mosque in North Sinai and strikes against Coptic Christians. It is hard to imagine that there will be any easing of the current restrictions on political activity in the pre-election period, as the authorities strive to keep things under control.

**A rerun of 2014?**

So it looks as if the 2018 election will end up being a rerun of 2014, with the same result. However, the quality of independent electoral observation may decline: the EU has not received a specific request to observe and with only two months to go, it is already too late for them to mobilise properly. The difficult experience last time, the absence of credible competition and lack of action on previous recommendations also do not help.

Others, including the Arab League, will be there, but the EU is regarded worldwide as the gold standard in these matters. Moreover, local civil society organisations, which played a key role in scrutinising previous elections, are now subject to even greater restrictions than in 2014.

Voter participation, as last time, will be a prime concern: large numbers of younger people are disaffected with politics, and many will probably not bother to vote. The average age of the population is 25, so this represents a significant proportion of the electorate. And with the Brotherhood out of the game, the 10-20% who would normally vote for Islamist parties will also stay at home. In addition, a number of parties are calling for a boycott of the vote, saying that there is no meaningful choice available to voters. This will also negatively affect the turnout.
All in all, the prospects for greater democratic legitimacy are not particularly good. But this may not worry the authorities too much. They know that the country’s stability and security remain the principal preoccupations of most of the Egyptian people and the international community. And while the authorities have sometimes struggled to provide these things, there is a perceived lack of alternatives to the current dispensation.

The problem is that absent that legitimacy, sustainable stability is likely to prove elusive. Even if its leverage is limited, the EU thus needs to keep engaging with Egypt on common interests such as counter-terrorism and migration but also on the values side of the equation, especially when it comes to support for civil society.

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General news

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini upon arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 22 January 2018. [Link](#)

Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 22 January 2018. [Link](#)

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussel, 22 January 2018. [Link](#)

Eastern Neighbourhood

**Armenia**

The fifth EU-Armenia subcommittee meeting on energy, transport, environment, climate action and civil protection, Yerevan, 29 January 2018. [Link](#)

Armenian civil society receives €1.74 million for new activities, Yerevan, 19 January 2018. [Link](#)

**Azerbaijan**

Statement by the Spokesperson on the sentencing of journalist Afgan Mukhtarli in Azerbaijan, 14 January 2018. [Link](#)

**Belarus**

Statement by the Spokesperson on two death sentences in
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Commissioner Hahn in Belarus to follow up the Eastern Partnership Summit, 29 January 2018. Link

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EU expert mission to support consumer rights protection in Georgia, Tbilisi, 10 January 2018. Link

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Russia

Statement on the detention of the Director of the Memorial Human Rights Centre in the Chechen Republic, Brussels, 11 January 2018. Link

EU needs to increase its resilience to Russian propaganda, say MEPs, 17 January 2018. Link

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Statement by the Spokesperson on the human rights situation in the Crimean peninsula, 19 January 2018. Link

Southern Neighbourhood

Federica Mogherini speaks about the Middle East peace process with foreign ministers of Norway and of Jordan, Brussels, 08 January 2018. Link

EU and Middle East and North Africa Join Forces in Beirut to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism, 18 January 2018. Link

Algeria

Le Commissaire Hahn en Algérie pour participer à la réunion ministérielle "Dialogue 5+5" (Méditerranée occidentale), 19 January 2018. Link

Egypt

EU Ambassadors meet Speaker of Parliament, agree to strengthen cooperation, 30 January 2018, Cairo. Link
5th meeting of the EU-Egypt Subcommittee on Political Matters, Human Rights & Democracy, 11 January 2018. [Link]

Israel

Déclaration de la porte-parole sur les dernières annonces faites par les autorités israéliennes concernant de nouvelles implantations, Brussels, 11 January 2018. [Link]

Lebanon

Press release from the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon following the EU Ambassadors' meeting with H.E. Prime Minister Saad Hariri, 29 January 2018. [Link]

European Union Counter Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove visits Lebanon, Beirut, 17 January 2018. [Link]

TAIEX Regional workshop on preventing and countering violent extremism kicks-off in Beirut, 17 January 2018. [Link]

Libya

Statement by the Spokesperson on the announcement by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on chemical materials removed from Libya, 15 January 2018. [Link]

Factsheet on the relations between Libya and the European Union, Brussels, 22 January 2018. [Link]

Statement by the Spokesperson on the attacks in Benghazi, Brussels, 24 January 2018. [Link]

Statement by the spokesperson on the executions in Benghazi, Brussels, 25 January 2018. [Link]

Palestine

EU and Norway to convene an extraordinary session of the international donor group for Palestine (AHLC), Brussels, 10 January 2018. [Link]

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the joint press statements with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Brussels, 22 January 2018. [Link]

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the joint press point ahead of the extraordinary session of the International Donor Group for Palestine (Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, AHLC), 31 January 2018. [Link]

New assistance package for Palestine: EU strongly committed to support socio-economic revival of East-Jerusalem, 31 January 2018. [Link]

Syria
Federica Mogherini met with the delegation of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, Brussels, 15 January 2018. [Link]

**Enlargement/Other**

**Albania**

EU-Albania 9th Subcommittee on Trade, Industry, Customs and Taxation took place in Brussels, 18 January 2018. [Link]

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Press Release on the 2nd SAA Subcommittee on Innovation, Information, Society and Social Policy, 30 January 2018. [Link]

**Kosovo**

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini speaks to Presidents Vučić and Thaçi, 16 January 2018. [Link]

Kosovo and EU held 2nd SAA Sub-committee on Internal Market, Competition and Consumer and Health Protection, 31 January 2018. [Link]

**Serbia**

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini speaks to Presidents Vučić and Thaçi, 16 January 2018. [Link]

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Tajani: Enlargement is back at the top of EU priorities, 31 January 2018. [Link]

**Turkey**

EUR 25 million to support Turkey in providing protection to refugees and asylum-seekers, 11 January 2018. [Link]

Federica Mogherini meets Turkish EU Affairs Minister Ömer Çelik, 25 January 2018. [Link]

**EEA/EFTA**

EEA EFTA Comments on the public consultation on reporting formalities for ships, 17 January 2018. [Link]

Save the date: The EU and the Western Balkans - Will the Enlargement Strategy Paper signal a renewed EU commitment to the region?
Recent statements by the President of the European Commission and other EU leaders on the EU's commitment towards the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries are a welcome sign that the region is finally back on the EU's priority list. The deterioration in democratic standards and the rule of law over the past few years have underlined the continued fragility of those countries in the EU's nearest neighbourhood. The European Commission’s Enlargement Strategy Paper to be published on 6th February will be the first of several official events and activities planned for this year focusing on the Western Balkans. The content of this much anticipated document will set the tone for the EU's approach towards the region for the forthcoming period.

The presentation by Mr. Maciej Popowski, Deputy Director General, Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, will provide an opportunity to learn first hand of the approach put forward by the European Commission, and the perspectives for the coming period.

Save the date: Egypt after the presidential election

The first round of Egypt’s presidential election will take place on 26-28th March. Preparations for the vote are underway, though there are concerns about the lack of credible competition to the incumbent, President Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi. Seven years on from the January 2011 revolution, the country continues to grapple with major challenges in security and development, and with population growth and poverty rates at high levels, an ongoing insurgency in Northern Sinai, as well as wider conflicts and instability in the region, whoever wins will face a host of problems in the years ahead.

Mohammed Anwar Sadat, one of Egypt’s most prominent civilian Politicians, President of the Reform and Development party and nephew of the late President Sadat, will give a briefing on the current situation in the country and prospects for the election and its aftermath.
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