



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

How Much Will the Pandemic Change Egyptian Governance and for How Long?

AMR HAMZAWY AND NATHAN J. BROWN

The Egyptian regime has reacted in an unexpected way to the global pandemic—with civilian, technocratic, and expert bodies leading the way and even some (admittedly officially patrolled) political debate being allowed to emerge. Does this portend a real change in Egyptian governance, and if so, why, what kind, and will it last?

The initial indications are that lines of authority and responsibility have been redrawn as a result of the various challenges to public health, economic activity, and social life resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. The shifts are far from radical, but they may result in some lasting changes in Egyptian governance and politics. The regime has not become more liberal or democratic, but it has become more technocratic. Rather than assessing the overall effectiveness of the official Egyptian response to the coronavirus—a response that raises profound concerns about the pandemic’s long-term devastating impacts—this article focuses on the ways that policymaking, information sharing, and politics have shifted and on how long-lasting these shifts are likely to be.

INITIAL REACTIONS AND RECALIBRATION

When it became clear in February 2020 that COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, presented a global health challenge that would leave no society unaffected, past behavior suggested that the Egyptian regime would deny or obscure the severity of the problem, shifting blame to external and internal enemies. To the extent a problem was acknowledged, it would be understood by the regime and presented to citizens as a security challenge to be met by Egypt’s most effective institutions, especially the military.

And indeed, there were some initial [forays](#) in such directions. But from the [beginning](#), there were [signs](#) that the regime’s efforts might not be enough. As [international media](#) began [reporting](#) coronavirus infections among [U.S. and European tourists](#) returning from [Egypt](#), the regime seemed a bit off balance. After initially directing ire at foreign journalists, even [expelling](#) Ruth Michaelson of the Guardian, [officials](#) at the cabinet level began to treat the matter as more than



a public relations problem. Initially, technocrats were portrayed as analysts, while the military were portrayed as actors. Officers and soldiers were shown disinfecting and sanitizing public buildings on camera—with stirring background music and patriotic symbols—and were praised in the media for safeguarding fellow citizens' well-being.

Throughout his leadership, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has used speeches and staged public interventions to actively shape the government's policy and rhetoric regarding ongoing public crises, such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the war on terrorism in the Sinai peninsula, and the aftermath of the Egyptian-Saudi two island deal.

Egyptians have also grown accustomed not only to a commanding president but also to army-led quick fixes to shortages in essential medical supplies, such as infant and childhood vaccines. Using its factories and production lines, the army has always staged its role in crisis management as autonomous and supra-governmental in nature. Indeed, any problem, no matter how technical, seemed to have a military solution. In 2016, the government suddenly abandoned its support for the Egyptian pound, allowing its value to float. Egyptians watched the value of their currency drop quickly by one-third and then gradually decline so that a year and a half after the float, the pound had lost half its value against the dollar. While some devaluation had been expected, the decision to float the pound was sudden, drastic, and opaque—and led to rapidly rising prices. Yet in preparation for the move, the military had already begun highlighting its role in distributing basic commodities. While the central bank was allowed to announce the float to the public, the military stepped in with offers of cheap boxes of basic goods. As the inflation rate soared between 2016 and 2018, the military continued its policy of sporadically alleviating economic pressure on the poor and impoverished segments of the population by offering basic commodities at reduced prices.

The message in these earlier crises seemed to be that the president was in charge and the military could act while civilians dithered. But this time, the president gradually grew remarkably quiet as the coronavirus pandemic continued. And as he stepped back—confining himself to general statements praising the solidarity of Egyptians—so did the military.

At first, it was unclear whether this would be a lasting trend. Initially, the regime seemed to increase presidential prerogatives. After receiving parliamentary approval, Sisi amended several stipulations of the 1958 Emergency Law (Law Number 162) to enable the security and armed forces to carry out presidential orders and to expand the jurisdiction of the military judiciary in times of a declared state of emergency (which has been in effect in Egypt since April 2017).

But the apparent presidential power grab actually indicated something a bit more complicated. Egypt's emergency framework certainly empowers the president, but many of its provisions actually mention (or can be delegated to) the prime minister. In the past, this has been regarded as a formality, even when the president did delegate tasks. So, few noticed that the current mandate fully delegates the emergency provisions to the prime minister (as Article 3 of the declaration explicitly states). As matters evolved, it became clear that it was actually the prime minister who has been enabled to decree measures and issue sweeping decisions in the fight against the pandemic.

The Egyptian regime seems to have countered its initial reflexes and devised a different response—one that treats the threats to public health and the economy more seriously and as a set of technical rather than security challenges. This new response demands the engagement of state actors that had been eclipsed or dominated in recent years. The result expands the role and prerogatives of the cabinet of ministers as opposed to the presidency, the military, and security bodies. Transparency has been a missing virtue of the regime,

but civilian officials now present themselves as the most (or even the only) reliable source of data on pandemic-related issues like coronavirus case counts, healthcare capacity, and economic responses.

WHO STEPPED FORWARD?

If the president and army are stepping back, who is stepping forward? First, and most prominently, the cabinet has seen a more substantial shift in its role.

Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly has been leading government responses to the pandemic. Capitalizing on the delegation of presidential emergency powers, the prime minister has **announced** different curfew regulations, **ordered** universities and schools to close, **limited** the opening hours of restaurants and cafes, and **imposed** fixed prices on medical supplies and services in private hospitals. The prime minister has **assigned** responsibilities to different cabinet ministers involved in fighting the pandemic and mitigating its economic and social impacts. He has pushed for the formation of special bodies to coordinate the government response—all the way from a **high-profile crisis commission** under his leadership to **crisis management groups** at the governorate level. He has also **spoken** regularly to Egyptians, delivering press briefings and periodic assessments of the government response to the pandemic.

In March 2020, Madbouly announced that he was **creating** a high commission to manage Egypt's response to COVID-19. Members included the ministers of health and population, supplies and domestic trade, education, higher education, finance, local development, interior, and state minister of media, as well as **the newly appointed** health and prevention adviser to the president and the head of the Egyptian Authority for Drugs and the Procurement of Medical Supplies and Technology. The prime minister has **embedded** the coordination of government responses within commission, ranging

from the health, education, and financial sectors to repatriation efforts for Egyptians stranded in other countries. Madbouly also spearheaded the government's economic response to the pandemic and facilitated a dialogue between his cabinet, the private sector, and economic research institutions to **map out** the impacts of the pandemic and best possible responses to them.

While the prime minister's leadership role has been strong, other ministers have also been quite active. For example, other cabinet members, most prominently Health and Population Minister Halah Zayed, have been spearheading the government response. Technocrats leading other civilian ministries such as the ministries of supplies, education, higher education, finance, and media have shouldered key tasks in shaping the government response and steering it daily. The voices of these technocrats, including the prime minister as the leading technocrat, have grown dominant in the crisis management effort.

Military and security voices are still heard but most often when speaking from their cabinet seats (interior, defense, and military production). But they are no longer acting like first among less-than equals. Within cabinet discussions, their voices have now taken back seats in the fight against the pandemic. Military and security bodies still make forays—such as when the Ministry of Military Production **announced** the production of face masks and military units distributed some in public—but the scale is modest and episodic as they act as normal agencies rather than masters of the civilian realm. Occasionally civilian actors will **equate themselves** with soldiers defending the nation, but much more often they step forward based on their scientific expertise—as if Egypt is being guided by those in laboratory coats rather than military uniforms.

The military has also come to the support of civilian leaders and the private sector by more quietly **providing** needed medical supplies, manufacturing essential medical equipment, **disinfecting** public buildings,



increasing capacity in public hospitals, and accelerating the production of face masks in both military and private sector factories. Furthermore, officers and soldiers of the armed forces, similar to various state institutions and agencies, have donated 100 million Egyptian pounds (\$6.2 million) to aid the government's fight against the pandemic.

Similar to the army, which has come to accept its embedded role within the cabinet, the Ministry of Interior and national security agencies have been presenting themselves as government institutions, receiving tasks from the technocratic leadership of the prime minister and key civilian ministers.

This contrasts quite strongly with other ministries that have swung into action quite publicly—the Ministry of International Cooperation by organizing aid, the Ministry of Education by shutting down schools and making preparations for instruction and examinations to continue, the Ministry of Higher Education for suspending on-campus instruction, the Ministry of Justice by temporarily suspending court sessions (which have now resumed), and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development by urging efforts to maintain economic activity and making preparations for recovery. Indeed, most ministries have stepped in with their own sets of public health measures, palliative programs for suffering citizens, or activities to help their sector manage the difficulties of curfews, restrictions on public gatherings, and economic uncertainty. To the extent that coordination is visible, it comes from the prime minister and the cabinet, not the president.

Not only do policy pronouncers wear civilian clothes, but also official sources of information. Ministers have encouraged Egyptians to pursue online and hybrid education at various levels, and some ministers address citizens while wearing not merely civilian garb but face

masks, too. Secondary school students and their parents search the news for the latest word from the minister of education for the latest instructions on how the general secondary school examinations will be administered.

BROADENING AND DEEPENING THE CIVILIAN RESPONSES

This new trend of crisis management goes beyond empowering the cabinet and civilian ministries to enabling mid-level bureaucracy, local government, religious institutions, and professional associations to play prominent roles in tackling the challenges of the pandemic.

There are signs of a push toward decentralization. The prime minister has enabled governors and municipal authorities to respond autonomously to the pandemic's health challenges without waiting for orders and green lights from the traditionally dominant central government. He has also created direct communication and reporting channels between himself and the governors. And indeed, provincial and local governments have not only been unleashed, but they also have been goaded, even ordered, into action (by the prime minister and cabinet, not the president). This most often to ensure that regional medical facilities stayed open and medical personnel came to work.

Along with local government, the official religious establishment has stepped in—a bit uncertainly at first but eventually with consistency and determination. Al-Azhar, an imposing complex of Islamic educational and research bodies and the most prominent Egyptian Sunni religious institution, led the way by suggesting that congregational prayers could be suspended, a step that set off a brief tussle with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The minister, far more supportive of the regime,

appeared to toe the crumbling official line that the coronavirus did not present a large problem and that the authorities could handle it with mild measures. The Coptic Church struggled to choose between the need to protect worshippers and a desire to remain the master of its own house. But by late March, all religious authorities had swung forcefully behind the suspension of congregational prayer and, as Coptic Easter and then Ramadan approached, mandated that religious obligations be performed at home.

While not the most publicly visible authorities, the willingness of leading representatives of such structures to speak out and even act—by closing mosques and churches to worshippers and disciplining preachers who evaded orders—had an enormous impact on public behavior. And religious officials continue to respond to sensitive matters. Al-Azhar, for instance, [denounced the selling of plasma](#) shortly after the minister of health and population suggested that some suffering from the virus could receive infusions from those who had acquired antibodies. Their denunciation allowed the faithful to make plasma donations but not accept payment, thereby making all donations voluntary and preventing exploitation of the poor, who may have donated for payment but would choose not to donate voluntarily.

As the pandemic has worn on, this collection of civilian actors has [moved](#) from crisis management to ongoing management. It was the Egyptian government that refused to adopt the more stringent restrictions on social and public activity that other countries piloted, instead confining the measures to nighttime curfews and some restrictions on social behavior and public gatherings. But it was civilian actors who led the way in relaxing even these restrictions. On May 14, 2020, the Ministry of Health and Population [issued](#) a three-phased coronavirus coexistence plan to gradually reopen the country. The prime minister [approved](#) the plan,

calling on citizens to abide by the regulations in each phase and threatening penalties in case of violations. In the following days, the COVID-19 commission met several times to discuss measures to [restart](#) the economy and [resume](#) congregational prayer and other religious activities, sports competitions, cultural events, and domestic as well as international flights. The Ministry of Education, struggling to balance public health considerations and the requirement to graduate high schoolers, [announced](#) that the general secondary examinations would begin on June 21, 2020, and would combine [on-site and remote testing](#).

These policies do have the weight of the state behind them; to ensure their full enforcement, the government has resorted to surveillance, deterrence, and symbolic measures implemented by the security forces. When the curfew order was issued, the presence of [patrolling police cars and checkpoints](#) in various Egyptian cities increased. On May 15, 2020, the Ministry of the Interior [announced](#) that it arrested close to 6,000 citizens who violated the curfew order. Also in May, the [security forces](#) chased groups of citizens who attempted to perform congregational prayers, either during the holy month of Ramadan or to mark its end. [Penalties for violators](#) have been enshrined in governmental decisions, ranging from fines for not wearing face masks in public to possible imprisonment for violating the curfew order.

POLITICS OUT OF HIBERNATION— BUT ON A SHORT LEASH?

While sharp restrictions on speech and behavior remain in place, the multiplication of official actors means there is no longer a single clear official narrative. Commenting on the challenges and impacts of the pandemic, the state minister of media recently [called on Egyptians](#)



to accept the diversity in opinion and warned against viewing difference as treasonous. Indeed, just over a week earlier, the minister of higher education—himself a former dental school dean—**speculated** in formal remarks that the real number of coronavirus cases in Egypt might be over four times the official figure. The jarring announcement attracted attention but did not seem to indicate a portentous power struggle; at the end of May, he **held a joint press conference** with the minister of health and population about how Egypt's hospitals (with university hospitals under his oversight) were handling the pandemic.

The contained cacophony is patrolled but involves more than ministers and high-level officials releasing information and speaking in authoritative voices. One nonstate (or perhaps semi-official) group of actors has been entering the fray: professional associations. These bodies—composed of practitioners of specific professions—are generally state-recognized and organized. Since 2013, the regime has made a **concerted (and successful) effort** to keep the associations under the control of loyal and supportive voices, but they have still stepped forward to advocate for their members in the current crisis.

The most vocal association has been the doctors' syndicate, often joined by other medical syndicates (such as the nurses' syndicate). As early as the end of March, the doctors' syndicate **became a forum for complaints** about the supplies of necessary equipment; and its demands **became more insistent** in April as COVID-19 cases among medical personnel began to increase. Gradually becoming **a source of information** on the problem in the medical profession, by mid-May, the syndicates moved beyond insisting on testing for medical personnel and the provision of equipment to much broader and more stringent public health measures generally, **such as an extension of the curfew**. They sharpened their rhetoric as well, addressing a **public letter** to the minister of health and to Sisi himself rather than addressing their recommendations to the

public more generally.

The tensions between the syndicates and the minister of health and population have **burst** into full public view, an unusual development in a country where oversight of the press has recently functioned to keep discordant voices out of public conversation. The head of the nurses' syndicate passed the buck to the prime minister but used stronger rhetoric by **insisting** that fatalities among the nursing profession should be accorded the same honor and treatment as martyred soldiers of the armed forces and security forces. This was not mere grandstanding by syndicate leadership; there was strong evidence of discontent among the rank and file. In fact, reports **circulated** from various locations in the country that medical personnel who felt exposed and overworked were beginning to resign, stay at home, and even call for strikes. The Madbouly government acted swiftly to **contain discontent** within the ranks and files of medical and nursing teams, **publicly recognizing their life-saving roles** and stipulating **better safety measures** in public and private hospitals.

Some professional associations have been quieter; for example, others on the front lines—such as **the teachers' syndicate**—have stepped forward to advocate for and support members in much less confrontational ways, such as asking the respective minister and the prime minister to secure more financial resources for **embattled practitioners**.

Is this the rebirth of fuller political activism in Egypt? In a word, no. But it is still significant. In Egypt's pandemic conditions, the range of what can be said is greater, but the number of people who can speak safely is still small.

Doctors have **complained** not simply that they have been unheard, but that at times some have been punished or instructed to keep quiet. Some public voices threatened with punishment—such as the broadcaster charged with **promoting** a dish made with the vegetable *mulukhiyya* as a cure for COVID-19—do indeed seem

like deeply irresponsible voices. But on other occasions, it is not clear if [the speech is being penalized](#) for just being inconvenient rather than inaccurate. The minister of higher education may be able to question public statistics, but not everyone has the same license. For example, private medical care has been [pilloried](#) for its high fees and its providers are not granted a full media presence to tell their side of the story. And arrests of critical doctors have been sufficiently widespread to startle international journalists who have begun [to follow the trend](#).

But while speech is still patrolled, there is still evidence of a significant political shift—one that cannot be reduced to more or less freedom. What is distinctive about the current moment is the nature of speech allowed. Again, the most instructive comparison is with [the recent past](#). In the 1992 earthquake, professional associations played a prominent role as well. At that time, many associations were dominated by Islamists generally and by the Muslim Brotherhood specifically. They stepped in quite dramatically in order to provide emergency relief. Some of this assistance came directly from Islamist organizations, but a good deal came from the professional associations they dominated. The effect was dramatic in terms of earning Islamists a reputation for empathy, effectiveness, and a powerful public spirit—one that contrasted with the reputation of public bodies being sluggish and ineffectual. The more contentious 1990s—and the tug-of-war between Islamists and the regime—were very much a part of this story.

The shift happening today, although significant, is far more restricted. The professional associations are not offering an alternative social or political vision; they are primarily advocating for their members. And they are largely allowed to do so—provided they stop there. They are not connected to any opposition (their leaders are selected—not just by their members but by security bodies that watch them carefully—for their professional qualifications and tame politics). But in the process, they provide another source of information, which

sometimes delivers less pleasant news.

WHY THE SHIFT?

Why has this shift taken place? The answer has to be speculative: any reader of an Egyptian newspaper cannot fail to notice fewer statements by the president about threats and duties and fewer photographs of generals in commanding poses and, instead, more depictions of men and women in business suits speaking about infection curves, statistics, and ministerial decisions. But while the shift is clear, Egyptians do not discuss it. Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam has been almost as invisible as Sisi in addressing the public health crisis, a remarkable change that almost never receives mention.

While they do not say so, Egypt's leaders seem to realize that the questions for Egyptian governance now are not how to defend national security but how to manage public space during a pandemic, teach pupils remotely, deal with economic dislocation, administer the general secondary examinations, manage public worship, and ensure that Egyptians are washing their hands and wearing face masks.

The armed forces and the police have a supporting role to play in some of these efforts, but technical expertise and public compliance are needed in much greater supply. The armed forces and the police need to be able to make the decisions they see as required. But technocrats require a level of trust in public authority, in the accuracy of information, and in the instructions to change personal routines and social practices. Egypt's senior leaders may have also seen the costs of slow action in places like Iran and, casting glances around the world, realized that the ingredients of effective coping seemed similar everywhere: transparency and social distancing rather than the mobilization of troops or increased police patrols.

It may also be the case that the military itself feels its personnel have been too exposed, with the virus



claiming **some senior officers** early and its soldiers generally housed in conditions that seem ill-equipped to deal with contagion.

And, of course, the measures required are onerous, involving restricting assembly, managing serious economic dislocation, and asking Egyptians to change their personal practices. Their success is gauged by the number of people who do not die, the jobs not lost, and a recovery that lasts months rather than years. Such decisions might be more attractively left on the shoulders of expendable ministers.

TACTICAL ADJUSTMENT OR STRATEGIC REORIENTATION?

These calculations, however, seem largely tactical in nature. Will there be any long-term impacts on the nature of governance in Egypt? For example, will there be a new division of roles and authorities between the presidency and the cabinet?

Whether the effects are short or long term, they involve technocracy rather than democracy. Technical expertise is emerging as a basis for leadership alongside security credentials, but this development is not unfamiliar

to Egyptians. A similar shift happened in Egypt between 2005 and 2011 (following the constitutional amendments of 2007, which empowered the office of the prime minister). The return of some political debate, less rivalry among institutions, a partial return of political contestation by professional associations, and even some plurality in sources of authoritative information might all be seen as positive changes, but they hardly amount to democratization or liberalization. They may also have some costs in terms of coordination—though so far the cabinet has managed to present a fairly coherent front with only brief episodes of friction or dissonance.

The long-term effects are thus likely to be subtle and reversible. None of the actors involved—with the limited exception of the professional associations—represent any social constituency. And while the ministers of health and population and of education might rise in prominence and gain reputational benefits, they are not in a position to pose as powerful political actors independently of their current functions.

But some shifts might survive. First, there seems to be a limited return to a pre-2011 period in which state institutions had more autonomy within their own realms and in which strong leaders in specific sectors emerged. In the early 2000s, those leaders tended to

be in economic, media, or judicial positions within Egypt's sprawling state apparatus. Now, the powerful actors seem to be in medicine, education, religion, and economic positions. International cooperation and planning are major focus areas of policy—and of authority.

Second, policy coordination may drop down a level from the presidency to the cabinet. There are also other devices—such as a [national training program](#) for promising youth entering government service—that seem designed to instill a unity of purpose across the bureaucracy.

Finally, and less tangibly, there are likely to be long-term repercussions in terms of trust. Poorer Egyptians will remember who was there to provide assistance to households without breadwinners; afflicted families will remember who provided care and who seemed unresponsive; and students will remember who helped them cope with learning before major examinations. Just as the 1992 earthquake left Egyptians in many communities with memories of who was able to help in a time of need, residues of good will and recognition of government efforts and resentments that are barely visible now on a national level are likely to linger for many years.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amr Hamzawy studied political science and developmental studies in Cairo, The Hague, and Berlin.

Nathan J. Brown, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, is a distinguished scholar and author of six well-received books on Arab politics.

NOTES

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by teal-colored text.

