

## The Working Group on Egypt

February 22, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20500

John R. Bolton  
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Mr. Bolton:

As a bipartisan group of foreign affairs specialists, we respectfully ask you to engage with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to express strong concern about the amendments to the Egyptian constitution now moving through a rapid approval process. These amendments constitute a stunning power grab, potentially allowing Sisi to stay in office until 2034—despite his promises to leave after his second term ends in 2022—as well as depriving the judiciary of the remaining vestiges of its independence and enshrining a formal role for the military in civilian politics. There is no indication of any popular demand or even support for these major constitutional changes and there may be widespread opposition. With al-Sisi's brutal repression of political opposition, civil society, and independent media, those who dare to express criticism risk imprisonment or worse

The Obama administration made a serious error in November 2012 when it failed to respond more aggressively to then-President Mohammed Morsi's undemocratic constitutional declaration. Popular opposition to Morsi rose and within eight months then-Defense Minister al-Sisi used that momentum to unseat Morsi in a military coup that ended the nascent democratic transition. Amidst Egyptian public criticism of the U.S. for failing to act to constrain Morsi's undemocratic actions, U.S. influence in Egypt and the Middle East region eroded.

We hope that the Trump administration will not make the same mistake now. Neither autocratic leaders nor the citizens of their countries respect the United States when it abandons its own values. Your administration has spoken out against incumbent efforts to change constitutions in order to stay in power in Bolivia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda; it should do so now regarding Egypt.

The United States should make clear in public and private that amendments to the Egyptian constitution intended to keep Sisi in power beyond 2022 meet neither Sisi's own commitments to his citizens nor the expectations of the American government. Pending amendments that drain independence away from the judiciary would also be dangerous for Egypt's political stability.

## The Working Group on Egypt

We ask you to call on President al-Sisi to do the following:

- Abide by the promise he made clearly and publicly on many occasions: to depart office after the completion of his second term in 2022;
- End the repression of Egypt's public sphere and guarantee freedoms of expression, association, and assembly so that any changes to the constitution can be debated fully and freely, without fear of consequences for citizens or civil society organizations
- If a referendum is eventually held on constitutional amendments after a full and free public debate, allow all citizens to vote their consciences in a process in which voting and counting are fully monitored by independent Egyptian civil society groups as well as credible international observers.

The proposed constitutional amendments, which might be approved in a matter of weeks, are only one of the many deprivations of the liberties of Egyptians perpetrated by the current government. Thousands of political prisoners (including American citizens), systematic torture, extrajudicial killings and disappearances, unfair trials and executions, continued persecution of local civil society and media, widespread economic misery, and expanding military control are all urgent matters.

Yet the constitutional amendments deserve special attention by the United States now because they will deprive Egyptians of any hope of addressing their concerns through peaceful politics. Sisi made clear through his sham re-election in 2018 that he will brook no political competition; the amendments now show that he is attempting to consolidate permanent one-man rule.

As a friend and long-time supporter of Egypt through military and economic aid, the United States should articulate its concerns clearly: these ill-advised amendments will put Egypt on the road to instability and put American goodwill at risk. Sisi should abide by the current constitution, including term limits, and completely reopen the public sphere to allow Egyptian citizens a full say in public affairs.

Your failure to speak out would be an abandonment of the American values Secretary Pompeo articulated in Cairo just last month. It would put the United States government in the position of currying favor with an autocratic leader while incurring the ire of an Egyptian public that will demand its inalienable rights soon enough.

Respectfully,

The Working Group on Egypt (a bipartisan group of foreign policy specialists formed in 2010)

**Michele Dunne, cochair** (Carnegie  
Endowment for International Peace)\*

**Robert Kagan, cochair** (Brookings  
Institution)

**Jamie Fly** (German Marshall Fund)

## The Working Group on Egypt

**Reuel Gerecht** (The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies)

**Amy Hawthorne** (Project on Middle East Democracy)

**Neil Hicks** (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies)

**Thomas Hill** (former Senior Professional Staff, House Committee on Foreign Affairs)

**Stephen McInerney** (Project on Middle East Democracy)

**Andrew Miller** (Project on Middle East Democracy)

**Tamara Wittes** (Brookings Institution)

**Ken Wollack** (former president, National Democratic Institute)

*\*Members participate in their individual capacity; institutional affiliations are provided for purpose of identification only.*