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serious & comprehensive?

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How far is Sisi's call for dialogue serious & comprehensive?

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On the twenty-sixth of April 2022, and in the presence of heads of some opposition political parties, in the so-called "Egyptian family Iftar" annual celebration, Sisi launched the call for a national dialogue, and assigned the National Youth Conference, in coordination with "all" political, partisan and youth currents to conduct a political dialogue, provided that its results would be raised to him. Al-Sisi pledged to attend the final stages of the proposed dialogue, reactivate the work of the presidential pardon committee that was formed in 2017, as one of the outputs of the National Youth Conference, and to expand the committee's work base, in cooperation with the competent agencies and civil society organizations.

To start with, Sisi's call for national dialogue contradicts his strategy of governance that he has followed since 2014 until today, where this strategy is based on closure of the public sphere, suppression of freedoms and boosting the security approach in addressing all issues, and his continuous assertion on more than one occasion that the key causes of Mubarak regime's fall was his failure to use enough force and allowing the opposition to expand in media and politics.

What has now changed? What are the implications of the national dialogue proposed by Sisi? And why at this particular time? Some analysts see that the regime has found itself prompted to call for dialogue, in light of a severe economic crisis that it has been experiencing for years, due to fluctuations in international funding sources, the exit of hot money, and the failure to receive the investments it hoped for from its Gulf allies and international partners, especially after the worsening economic crisis after the Russian war on Ukraine.

This point of view may be supported by the long talk of Sisi and his prime minister during the so-called "Egyptian Family Iftar" about the country's economic crisis, where the talk about the need for a national dialogue seemed to only manifest presidential directives to unite to be able to face the stifling economic crisis that the country has been experiencing, despite the regime's repudiation of any responsibility of it, and its exploitation of the two crises the Coronavirus and the Russian-Ukrainian war to hold them responsible for the recurrent failures in the face of the economic crisis.

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Despite the significance of the economic reasons in explaining Sisi's call for a national dialogue, such call is not without political reasons, as the regime has been subjected to a wave of strong international pressures during the past few months, most notably after the Palestinian-Egyptian activist Ramy Shaath was forced to give up his Egyptian citizenship, as a precondition for his release from prison and deportation to France, especially after Shaath's strong-worded speech at the European Parliament about the conditions of detainees in Egyptian prisons; as well as the escalation of these pressures after the killing of economic researcher Ayman Hodhoud after he had been kidnapped, disappeared, and tortured by the security services.

Sisi referred direction of the dialogue to the National Youth Conference, which is the product of a semi-periodic activity closer to the idea of the old Nasserist vanguard, as a product of youth conferences regularly organized by the National Training Academy, whose board of trustees is chaired by Sisi himself, based on his position as head of state, that is subject to supervision of the sovereign bodies directly, especially in sorting out the youth scheduled to attend the activities that Sisi attends, where these young people would then promote success of the political system, its ability to solve problems, and its proximity to young people (against the truth), given that it is the only political activity allowed within the framework of the current system.

In a report by Al-Jazeera issued two days after Sisi's call for national dialogue about the different reactions to the call, including support, caution, and skepticism, the report notes division of reactions into 3 divisions: the first, related to the absolutely supportive division; the second, related to those cautiously welcoming the proposal, where most of them are political forces inside that have been marginalized since Sisi came to power in 2014.

The third is related to those skeptical about a call for a vague political dialogue with unclear details, including the parties involved in it.

According to the al-Jazeera report, the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest political opposition group in Egypt, has remained silent, at least so far, about Sisi's initiative, which his supporters described as an unconditional initiative, but without the slightest indication of the possibility of inviting the Brotherhood, which has repeatedly confirmed that it is open to engagement in any political dialogue with the regime.

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However, several reports indicated that the Brotherhood was completely excluded from such a call, where observers have played down the idea of the regime opening up to the Brotherhood at the present time.

Assuming the exclusion of Islamists after the regime's relative success in separating the political issue from the economic issue in addressing the file of opposition overseas and the government's attempt to reform its relations with Qatar and Turkey without allowing any gains for the opposition abroad, but sometimes at its expense, therefore, we are in a process of dialogue with the regime's 30 June (2013) partners, with the aim of restoration of the former momentum and silencing the critical voices at home to allow Sisi to remain in power until 2030. Of course, this requires some concessions on the part of the regime in the issue of detainees of that current (of 30 June) and its parties to prove seriousness of the dialogue, amid rising calls for the need for "unity behind the regime", because the state is facing a severe economic and social crisis that had even preceded Covid-19 and the Ukrainian crisis, which was largely caused by the regime's wrong economic policies, despite its continued attempts to disclaim responsibility for that by any means.

Fragile opposition and low ceiling

The fragile civil opposition has been promoting, even more than the regime, the call for dialogue, considering it a golden opportunity to achieve any breakthrough in the closed public sphere. The opposition has much cheered the call and its results, even before being launched. However, the developments of events so far do not confirm this, whether in the limited number of releases of prisoners of conscience, or in the press statements of those invited to the dialogue.

For example, Khaled Daoud, the former head of the Constitution Party and one of the former regime detainees, said in an interview with Youm7 newspaper that "to prove goodwill, we asked the security authorities to release a list of 33 prisoners, including 25 pre-trial prisoners, and eight who have been sentenced to imprisonment, such as Hossam Mounis, Ziyad El-Eleimi, Alaa Abdel-Fattah, Mohamed Oxygen, Ahmed Douma and Fatima Ramadan," adding that he had previously been invited for dialogue, but he did not attend, stipulating the release of a number of prisoners so that it would be a good gesture for dialogue and participation in various activities," explaining: "This is certainly not a way of imposition of conditions, because we cannot impose our conditions on the state, but it is only

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a request. Therefore, what encouraged me to participate this time was the likely release of the 41 prisoners."

The next day, Youm7 newspaper, close to security services, reported that Daoud praised the patriotism of the regime, which angered Daoud and his friends on social media, prompting him to confirm that the interview with him had been distorted, and that only his statements to Al-Mashhad newspaper represented his position.

The strange thing is that Daoud's statements to Al-Mashhad newspaper were much worse than those mentioned in the headlines of his interview with the Youm7 newspaper, where he indicated in Al-Mashhad that "all the names (included in the release list) that were handed over to officials at the iftar party, were 33 names, in total, inside the prison for two to three years. We did not demand the release of people that may threaten the stability of the state, but rather they are prisoners of conscience," he said, adding, "We demand that the file of prisoners of conscience be closed permanently, especially the file of the 2019 prisoners, so that we begin to open a new page," that is the file of his detainees is limited to only his detainees belonging to his political current, who were arrested in 2019. This reflects the declining ambitions of those forces and their crushing to the fullest extent in front of the regime, as stated in Daoud's statement, "We did not go to negotiate or declare our support or unduly praise, we only went to submit our demands, create a positive atmosphere, and reduce the situation of tension, especially as we are on the verge of a severe economic crisis due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. This requires the need for working together, which will not happen while we are being arrested one by one."

Daoud responded to his critics, stressing that "many critics of the call for dialogue basically aspire for the overthrowing the regime, as they basically question its legitimacy, against our position as opposition parties, because we work within the framework of the law and constitution, and oppose Sisi, by nominating another candidate against him, as happened in the nomination of Hamdeen Sabahi in 2014."

In anticipation of an expected wave of criticism of various opposition figures that attended the Iftar party, they had stated to many websites and TV channels that they stipulated the exit of some of the opposition. They also stated that the arrangement of the iftar and dialogue sessions scheduled to be held after Eid al-Fitr, had begun earlier with leaders of a sovereign body that held several meetings

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with them before and after the 'Egyptian family iftar' along with several members of political and party forces, particularly Hamdeen Sabahi and others, to invited them to attend the iftar ceremony and participate in the official events of the state during the following days. However, the response of Sabahi and other party leaders was reportedly demanding the release of some of the imprisoned political opponents, notably Hossam Mounis, a member of the Popular Current Party; Ziad El Eleimi, member of the Egyptian Democratic Party; journalist Hisham Fouad; lawyer Mohamed El-Baqer; blogger Mohamed Oxygen, and others. The representatives of the sovereign apparatus reportedly responded positively to this request, on the condition that all of activists released from prison remain silent and stop criticizing the authorities.

It seems that the demand ceiling of many of the prominent figures of the civil opposition is extremely modest, where the ultimate objective of them is to get their friends out of prison, which coincides with a necessary interest of the regime, amid pursuit to whitewash its bad reputation by pretending to close the file of prisoners of conscience, restore the spirit of the 30 June alliance with its domesticated political forces that operate within the framework of the regime, and do not mind participation in sham elections, in return for releasing some of their detainees before the election season.

On the other hand, some observers are skeptical that the aim of the regime's call for dialogue is its desire to implicate the fragile opposition in the responsibility of failure in several files, such as the Nile waters and external debts, in attempt to pass the 2024 presidential elections and enable Sisi to remain in power under the guise of pluralism.

However, the current civil opposition, albeit fragile, believe that thae should join hands to push this regime to take serious and real procedures, and therefore, they released some objective conditions to ensure seriousness of the dialogue.

Some of those optimistic about the dialogue from parties of the civil forces remain skeptical about the results that could result from it. The head of the Karama Party and former member of parliament, Ahmed Al-Tantawi, stipulated that there should be a specific agenda for the proposed dialogue, "otherwise there is no sense in expecting us to forgive what has passed or acknowledge what is to come".

According to Al-Tantawi, they demanded a genuine dialogue on an equal basis with the government, within five axes, namely:

- Political reform and democratic transformation,
- Economic reform and social justice,
- Legislative and institutional reform,
- Human rights and public freedoms, and
- National security and national interests.

Although the regime's general discourse adopts inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the proposed dialogue, pledging that it "will not exclude any force" and that "the nation accommodates all, and that "difference in opinion should not spoil the nation's cause," in the words of Sisi, developments so far indicate that it is completely excluded to discuss any file other than the human rights file of the civil current parties, especially the release of Islamist detainees, or conducting negotiations with parties from them or even parties close to them.

Some of reported conditions of the "Civil Democratic Alliance" indicate a state of skepticism about the principle of comprehensiveness, in terms of the aspects and topics that will be discussed in the dialogue. Therefore, the movement suggested that the agenda should include five basic themes, as stated above.

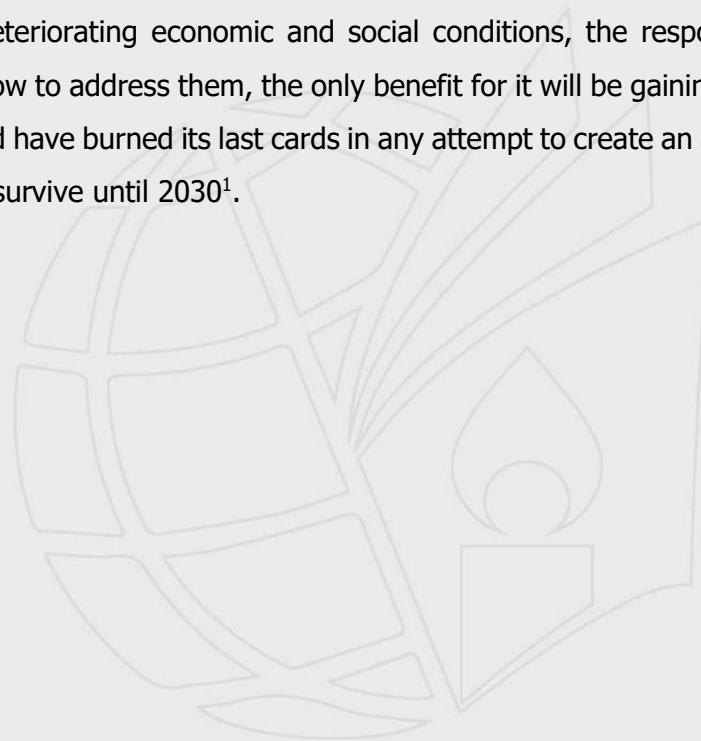
Conclusion

While some may be aware of the need to search for a united front before engaging in any supposed dialogues to achieve some gains in the face of one of the worst dictatorial regimes in Egypt's history, others tend to adopt an extremely modest ceiling of negotiation, which makes the regime the first beneficiary of such a situation, after excluding its main opponents and negotiating with such a fragile opposition, where negotiation becomes at gunpoint, and whoever withdraws, knows well that he is doomed to prison.

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On the other hand, the opposition overseas should be more serious, and to present their own perception of the dialogue, away from any attempts to lure them for engagement in scenarios aimed at beautifying the face of dictatorship and whitewashing its bad reputation. Also, they should remain close to the street and adopt its demands, with giving priority to the economic and social files along with the political and humanitarian files, especially the release of detainees from all currents.

With exclusion of political Islam from the proposed dialogue, unless the regime proves seriousness in handling the dialogue and negotiations with other political forces, albeit fragile, by discussing real agendas about the deteriorating economic and social conditions, the responsibility of the current regime thereof, and how to address them, the only benefit for it will be gaining more time, but in this case, the regime would have burned its last cards in any attempt to create an appropriate atmosphere that would allow it to survive until 2030¹.



¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies