

# Egypt: A National Dialogue or A Political Maneuver?

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Brief Analysis

**With key topics and figures excluded, Egypt's national dialogue is unlikely to achieve much in the way of reform.**

Only one month after the official launch of the National Dialogue in Egypt, the coordinators called for a temporary freeze on future sessions. They justified the pause by [claiming](#) (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1234/502375/Egypt/Foreign-Affairs/Egyptian-National-Dialogue;s-rd-session-postponed-.aspx>) that the conference room dedicated to convening the sessions had been damaged in a mild sandstorm that swept Cairo on June 1. Given the illogicality of the claim, observers doubt that the dialogue coordinators halted the sessions as a result of the storm, but rather to avoid a clash between participating political parties over the recent violent attacks on the Egyptian Engineers' Syndicate elections last week.

Two days before the storm, a group launched a deliberate violent assault on the Egyptian Engineers' Syndicate while voting on the continuity of the current syndicate leader, Tariq al-Nabarawy, who is independent of all political affiliations. The public prosecutor is currently investigating the shocking incident. Yet the footage [captured](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVeg0YfNmJs>) by eyewitnesses and investigations conducted by the local press [indicate](#) (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/502485/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Questions-of-confidence.aspx>) that several Members of Parliament affiliated with the Mustakbal Watan (Future of the Nation) Party were leading the attackers and personally participated in the offensive.

Mustakbal Watan is the majority party in the current parliament. The party was founded in November 2014, a few months after President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took office. Many of the old guards of the Mubarak regime joined this party and won most of the electoral districts loyal to Mubarak's dissolved National Democratic Party (NDP). One of the Mustakbal Watan party-affiliated parliamentarians who appeared in the footage of the syndicate attacks was a prominent member of Mubarak's NDP and was previously [accused](#) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19905435>) of hiring horses and camels to [attack](#) ([https://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/2/bloodshed\\_in\\_egypt\\_mubarak\\_supporters\\_riding](https://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/2/bloodshed_in_egypt_mubarak_supporters_riding)) nonviolent

protesters in Tahrir Square, during Egypt's Arab Spring revolution in 2011.

In other words, it's not the sandstorm that damaged the national dialogue's prospects. It was the fact that this recent violent incident broadly exposed the dialogue's fragility and lack of credibility. Even before the attack, the so-called "national dialogue" in Egypt had little to do with its glamorous title. It is neither a dialogue nor a national matter. Instead, it is a state-sponsored speaker series with an ever-extending time frame, carefully designed to co-opt weak but vocal opposition to President al-Sisi and to improve Cairo's tarnished image in the West.

The Mubarakists and Nasserists have been the most critical of Sisi's policies over the past nine years. Central to their criticism are comparisons between the current era and their nostalgic memories of their respective eras of power. These groups feel a sense of estrangement under the current state, especially in regard to the state's increasingly open bilateral and regional cooperation with Israel. The leftists, in particular, center animosity towards Israel in their political ideology.

Keeping these two particular groups busy under the guise of a national dialogue is one of the state's strategies to calm political tensions and diffuse popular anger directed at the government as Egypt weathers the unprecedented economic crisis of the past year. In the meantime, such talks and gatherings can allow state representatives to make direct contact with prominent opposition figures, persuading them to ally with the state's agenda before the anticipated 2024 presidential elections. Beyond this, however, the national dialogue is unlikely to deliver consequential results.

The national dialogue organizers spent an entire year doing logistical preparations, forming committees and subcommittees, and hiring rapporteurs and other staff for these committees. Despite the long planning period, the organizers failed to invite key factions of Egyptian civil society to what was marketed as a "national, comprehensive, and *all-inclusive*" dialogue.

Two groups have been deliberately excluded from joining the national dialogue. One of them is the Muslim Brotherhood (<https://www.newarab.com/news/muslim-brotherhood-excluded-egypt-national-dialogue>)—an illegal organization in Egypt—while the other is pro-west, pro-regional peace activists and civil society organizations. The Liberal Democracy Institute—a think tank which I lead—is one example. When I asked why I was banned from participating in the dialogue, I was told that my political views on Israel were disliked by the Nasserist dialogue organizers.

Other public figures with political orientations that are displeasing to the leftist/Nasserist organizers have been likewise excluded, including Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a prominent Egyptian-American sociologist and one of the oldest advocates of political reform and democratization in Egypt. His think tank, the Ibn Khaldun Center for Democratic Studies, is the oldest think tank in the Arab world focusing on civil society and democratization, yet it, too, was excluded. Notably, Dr. Ibrahim had previously spoken at Israeli universities. The absence of liberal pro-West activists at the dialogue was all the more noticeable given the invitation for Salafist figures to attend.

Despite the inefficiencies, there is a bright side to these gatherings. In the best-case scenario, the involved parties may use the momentum to directly express grievances. Already, former foreign minister Amr Moussa asserted (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/499011.aspx>) that "internal mistakes" are partly to blame for Egypt's current crises. Participants may be able to pressure for the release of their affiliated political prisoners or for some minor reforms to certain legislations and policies that are in line with the agenda of the state. Examples include the calls for making laws to control population growth, extending judicial supervision over elections, amending the notorious pre-trial detention law, and perhaps launching a commission for anti-discrimination wherein some of the leftist opposition figures could be appointed.

Nevertheless, the most controversial topics that would likely challenge state leadership will be completely avoided.

At the inauguration of the national dialogue in early May, the dialogue’s coordinator Daa Rashwan declared (<https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2023/05/07/egypt-national-dialogue-launched-with-several-issues-off-limits/>) the following three topics off-limits: “the existing constitution, foreign policy issues, and national security issues.”

When Sisi called for a comprehensive dialogue last year, hopes were high that Egyptian political life would finally be revitalized out of the rut of autocracy that has been dragging it down for decades. Indeed, the idea of incremental reforms rather than revolution appeals to most citizens, politicians, and activists in Egypt today. However, the shape and format of the final product of the so-called “national dialogue” turned out to be disappointing. The mere fact that certain topics and individuals have been deliberately excluded makes it hard to believe that the dialogue could contribute any tangible solutions to Egypt’s chronic political dysfunctions. The fact that dialogue discussions have now been suspended only reiterates this point. ❖

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