

A second spring for democracy in post-Mubarak Egypt? Findings from Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 133 | Thomas Isbell and David Jacobs

Summary

In early 2016, five years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Economist (2016) reported that hopes raised by the uprisings had been destroyed. “The wells of despair are overflowing,” the newspaper said, the uprisings having brought “nothing but woe.” In addition to stagnant economic growth, rent-seeking was “rampant,” security forces continued to repress the population, and grounds were more fertile than ever for the emergence of radicals “who posit their own brutal vision of Islamic Utopia as the only solution.”

Egypt, considered a bellwether in the region, was included in this bleak picture. Egyptians overthrew the autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and voted in a staunchly Islamist government headed by Mohamed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party. In June 2013, in a “soft coup” riding a wave of popular anger against the Islamist regime, the head of the Egyptian military, Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, became the latest president of Egypt to tout democratic ambitions for the country.

In a speech in early 2016, al-Sisi, having swapped his military uniform for a suit, told the Egyptian Parliament that the country had made a bold return to democracy and that constitutional institutions had been rebuilt. Many analysts differ, describing the current state as “not just cruel, arbitrary and unaccountable, but also both too incompetent and too broke to buy [the population’s] acquiescence” (Economist, 2015). Rights groups have accused the al-Sisi regime of wide-scale repression, including the jailing of thousands of Islamists and secular activists who took part in the 2011 uprisings against Mubarak (New Arab, 2016). Freedom House (2016) rates Egypt as “not free,” with political-rights and civil-liberties scores of 6 and 5, respectively (7 being the worst possible).

Using Afrobarometer survey data from Rounds 5 and 6, we inquire whether this external perception is shared by Egyptian citizens. How do they perceive their democracy and their government? Afrobarometer data provide a good indication of how Egyptians’ attitudes have evolved in the three years since the country’s first post-Arab Spring elections. Mohamed Morsi ruled from June 2012 to July 2013. The Round 5 survey in Egypt was conducted in March 2013, shortly before the end of Morsi’s rule. Round 6 of the Afrobarometer survey was conducted in June/July 2015 – almost exactly one year into al-Sisi’s presidency.

Our findings are somewhat puzzling – sharp increases in the number of Egyptians who see their country as democratic and are satisfied with the way democracy is working, yet lower levels of perceived political freedoms and of support for democracy and elections. One key may be growing support for a strong executive: Popular trust in the president has almost tripled since 2013.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Egypt, supervised by One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult Egyptians in June and July 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. One previous survey was conducted in Egypt in 2013.

Key findings

- Citizens' perceptions that Egypt is a democracy have doubled since 2013. Four in 10 respondents now say their country is "a full democracy" (11%) or "a democracy with minor problems" (31%) – about equal to the proportion who see it as "not a democracy" (14%) or "a democracy with major problems" (28%).
- Similarly, a majority (56%) – almost twice as many as in 2013 – say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy is working in their country.
- However, Egypt ranks well below the continental average in its support for democracy (54%) and its rejection of non-democratic regimes such as one-party rule (60%), one-man rule (49%), and especially military rule (33%).
- When Egyptians are asked what the word "democracy" means to them, the most frequent responses are "civil liberties and personal freedoms" and "equality and justice."
- While majorities say they feel at least "somewhat" free to say what they think (75%), to join any political organisation they want (62%), and to vote as they wish (70%), these proportions have declined since 2013.
- Support for choosing leaders through elections has dropped from 87% in 2013 to 67% in 2015, and only about four in 10 citizens (43%) support multiparty competition.
- An increasing number of Egyptians favour a strong president who makes laws (29%, up from 15% in 2013) and is not accountable to the House of Representatives (40%, up from 30% in 2013).
- Popular confidence in the president has skyrocketed, from 29% in 2013 to 82% in 2015 who say they trust him "somewhat" or "a lot."

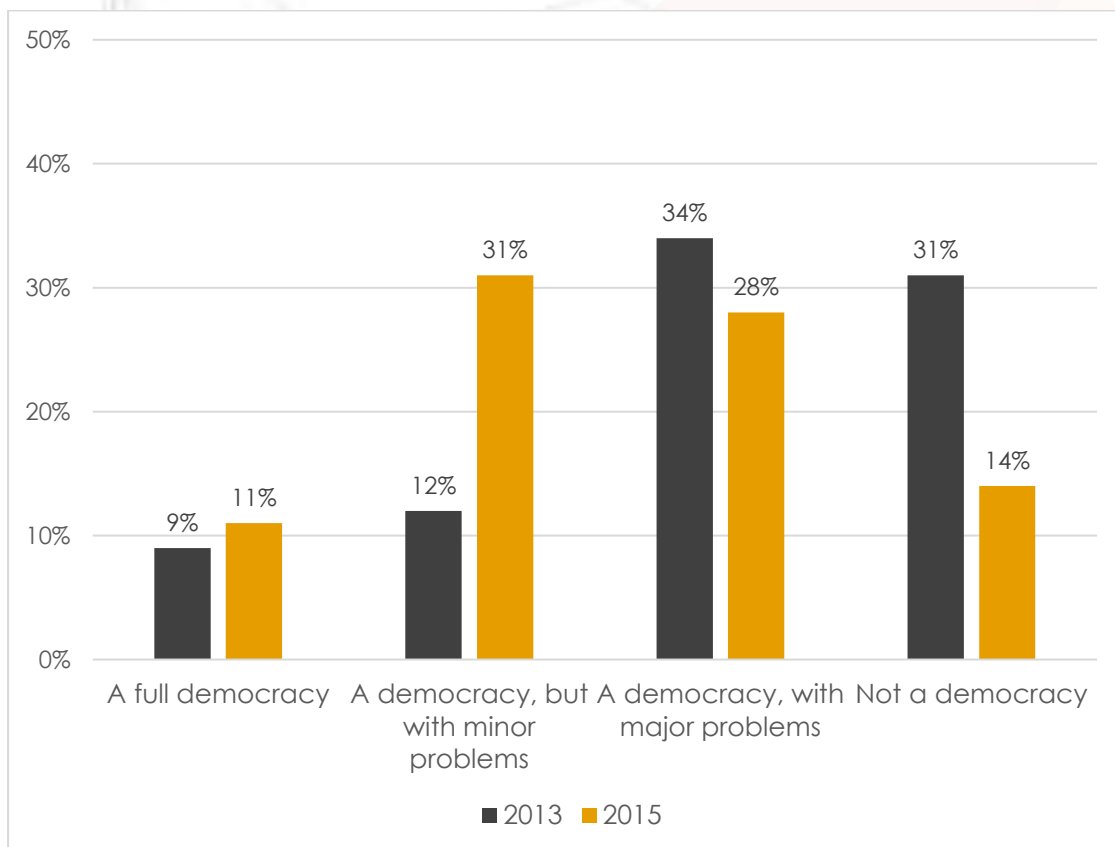
Perceived extent of democracy

Between 2013 and 2015, Egyptians' perceptions of their democracy improved dramatically (Figure 1). In 2013, two-thirds of citizens considered Egypt "not a democracy" (31%) or "a democracy with major problems" (34%), while only one in five said it was "a full democracy" (9%) or "a democracy with minor problems" (12%). By 2015, the proportion of Egyptians who see their country as "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems" doubled, to 42%, matching the number of those who consider it at best a democracy with major problems.

This perceived extent of democracy places Egypt below the average of 36 countries surveyed in 2014/2015 (49% who say they live in a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems), far behind Mauritius (76%), Botswana (75%), and Namibia (72%) (Figure 2) but well ahead of Sudan (22%) and Gabon (24%).

Focusing on the group with a negative view of the extent of Egypt's democracy ("not a democracy" or "a democracy with major problems"), we find that patterns are similar to those seen in 2013 (Figure 3). Younger respondents (aged 18-29) are more likely to be critical of their country's democracy (46%) than their elders (e.g. 31% of those aged 50 and older), as are citizens with at least a secondary education compared to their less-educated counterparts. Men more frequently share this view than women (44% vs. 38%), as do respondents experiencing high or moderate lived poverty¹ compared to wealthier citizens. One change is that urban and rural residents are now equally likely to see their country as, at best, a democracy with major problems.

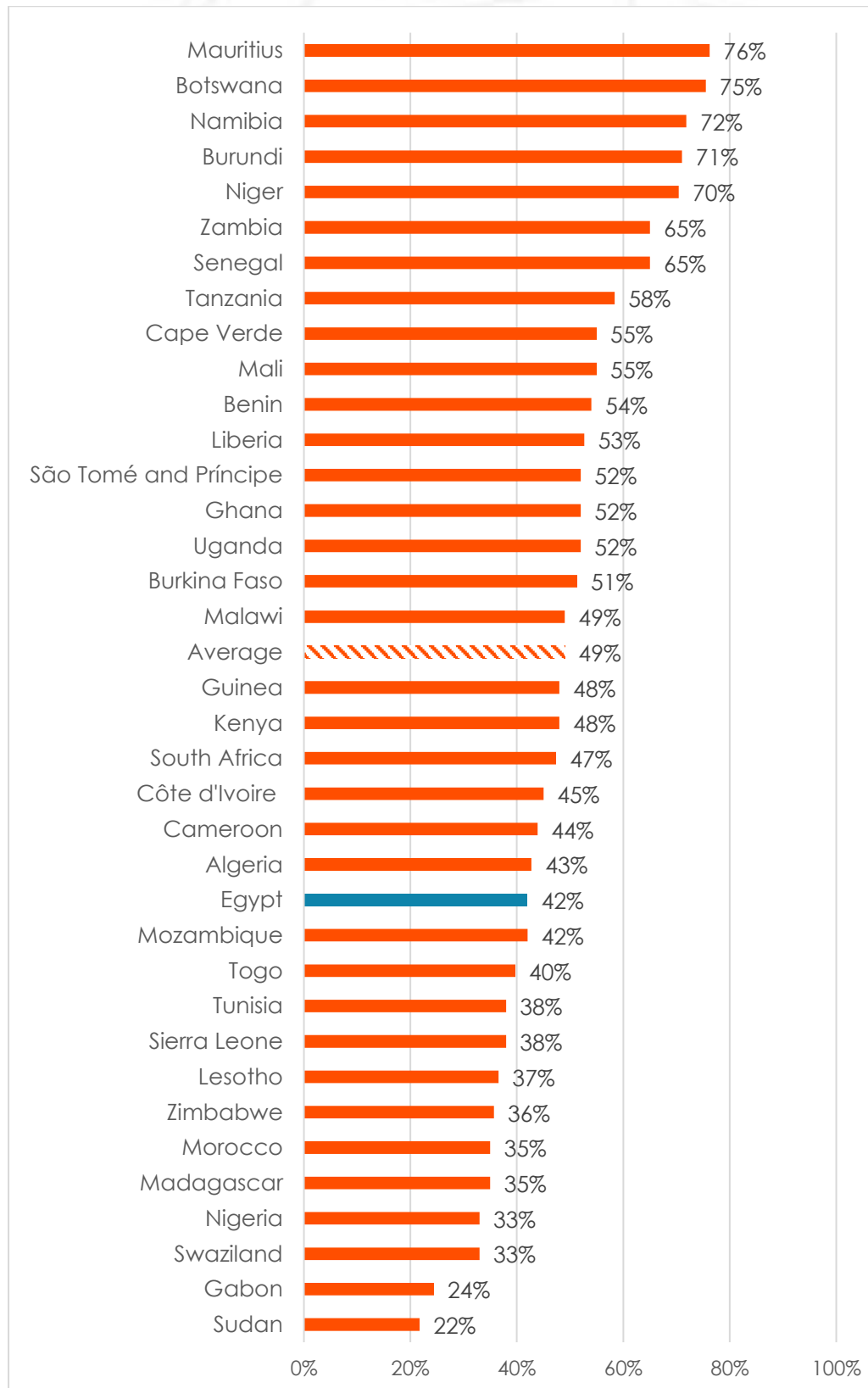
Figure 1: Perceived extent of democracy | Egypt | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion how much of a democracy is Egypt today?*

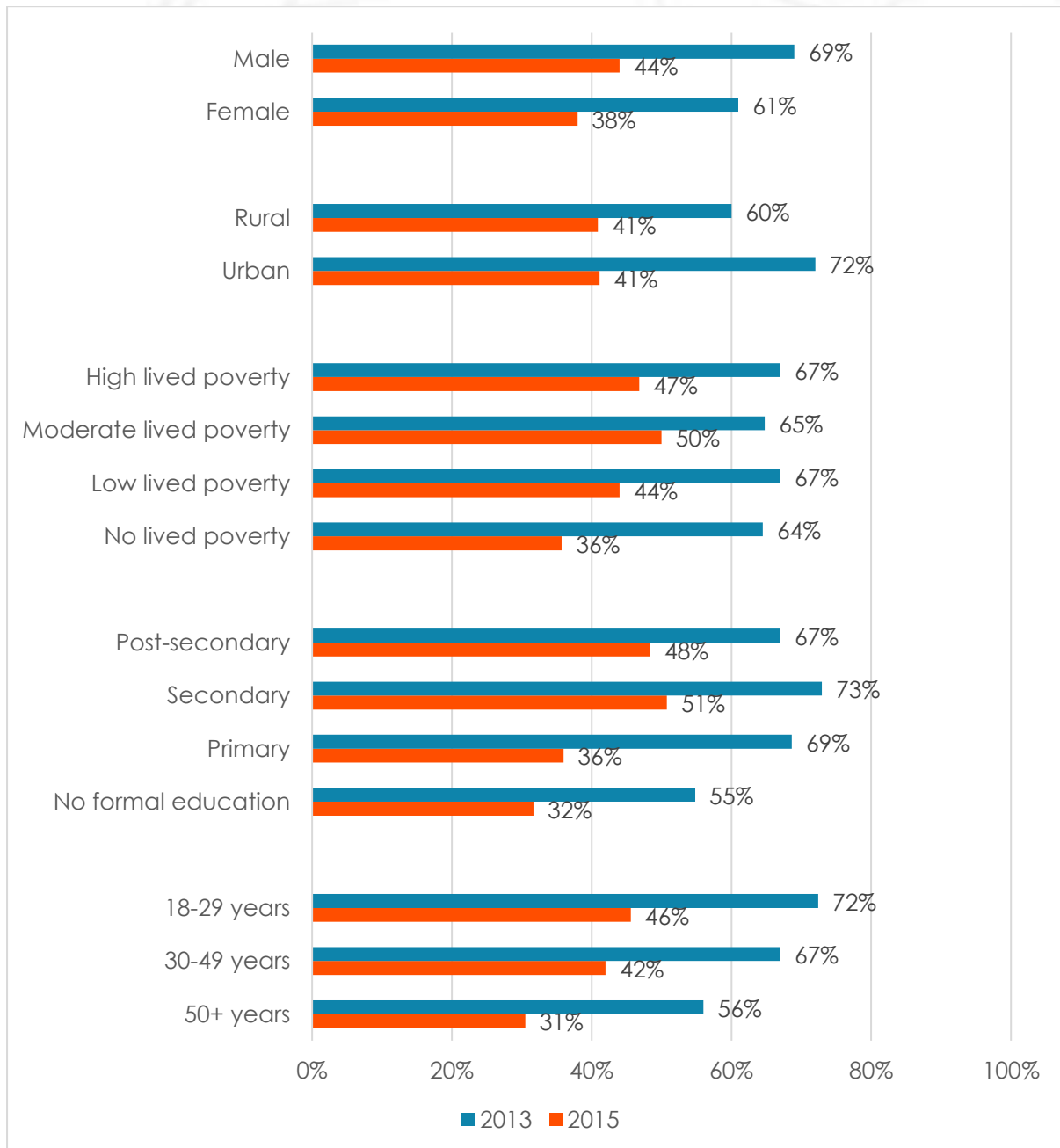
¹ Afrobarometer measures lived poverty by asking respondents how often they or their family members went without enough food, enough clean water, medicines or medical treatment, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income during the previous year. "No lived poverty" refers to full access to all five basic necessities, while "high lived poverty" refers to regular shortages of these goods and services. (For more information on the Lived Poverty Index, see Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 29, available at www.afrobarometer.org).

Figure 2: Extent of democracy | 36 African countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is your country today?*
 (% who say "a full democracy" or "a democracy, but with minor problems")

Figure 3: Perception of Egypt as ‘not a democracy’ or ‘a democracy with major problems’ | by socio-demographic group | Egypt | 2013-2015

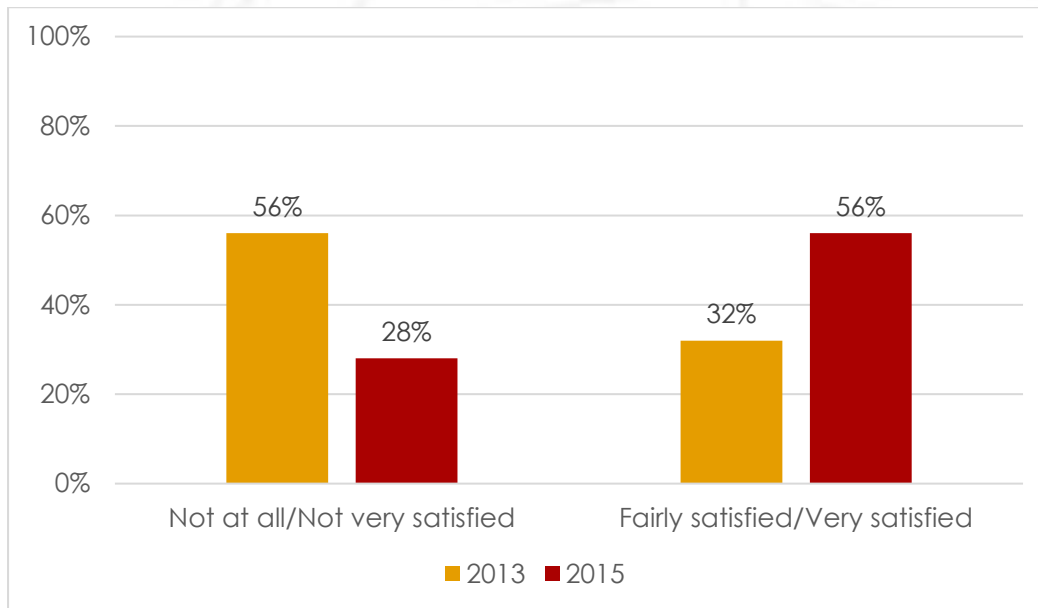


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion how much of a democracy is Egypt today? (% who say “not a democracy” or “a democracy with major problems”)*

Satisfaction with democracy

As with the perceived extent of democracy, Egyptians' satisfaction with the way their democracy is working has improved dramatically since 2013. A majority (56%) now say they are “fairly” or “very” satisfied, compared to 28% who are “not at all” or “not very” satisfied – a complete reversal of the 2013 result (Figure 4). Then, only 32% were at least fairly satisfied, while the majority of respondents at 56% were at not very satisfied with democracy or not satisfied at all.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with democracy | Egypt | 2013-2015

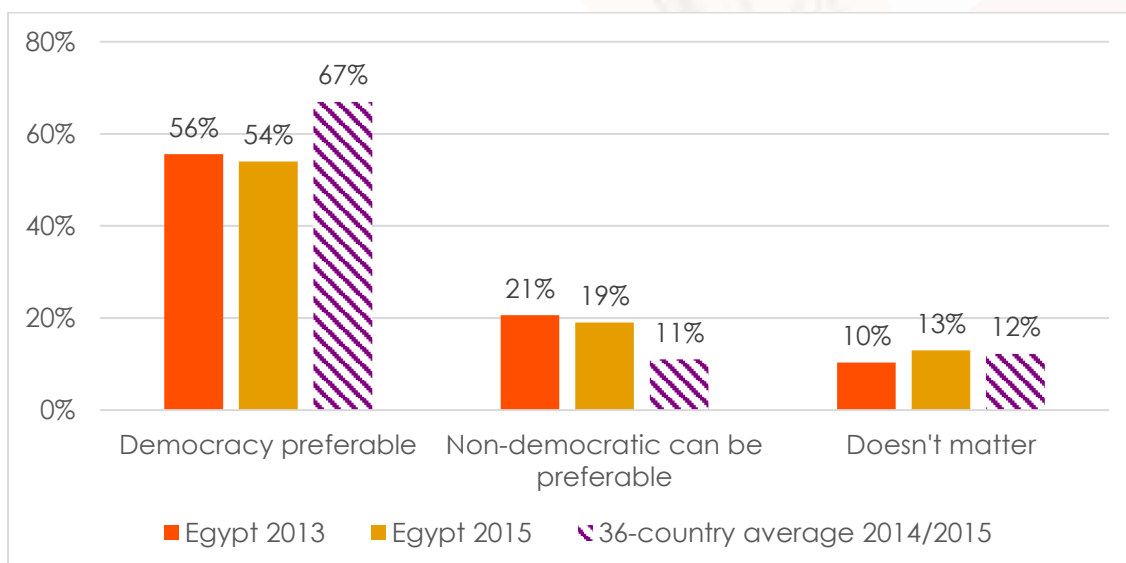


Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Egypt?

Support for democracy

While satisfaction with Egyptian democracy has improved, support for democracy remains low compared to other African countries. A majority (54%) of Egyptians prefer democracy over any other political system (similar to the 2013 proportion of 56%), but this is a considerably lower level of support for democracy than the continental average (67%) (Figure 5). About one in five Egyptians (19%) say that non-democratic regimes can sometimes be preferable, and 13% say it doesn't matter what kind of regime the country has.

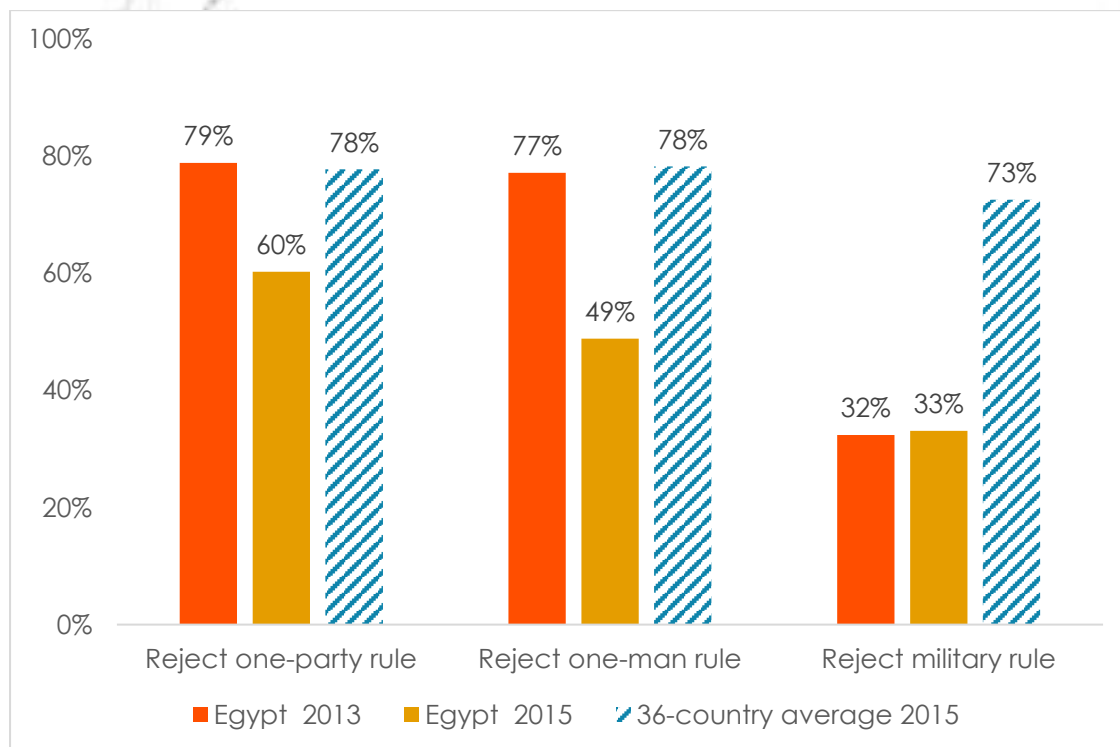
Figure 5: Support for democracy | Egypt and 36-country average | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Similarly, when asked how they feel about specific non-democratic types of political systems, Egyptians report far more accepting attitudes than most Africans, and this acceptance has increased since 2013 (Figure 6). While a majority (60%) reject one-party rule, this is significantly lower than the average across 36 countries (78%) and has decreased from 79% in 2013. Less than a majority (49%) reject one-man rule, far below the 2013 proportion (77%) and the continental average (78%). And Egypt ranks dead last among 36 African countries in terms of rejecting military dictatorship (33%, about the same as in 2013).

Figure 6: Rejection of non-democratic alternatives | Egypt and 36-country average | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked:

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives:

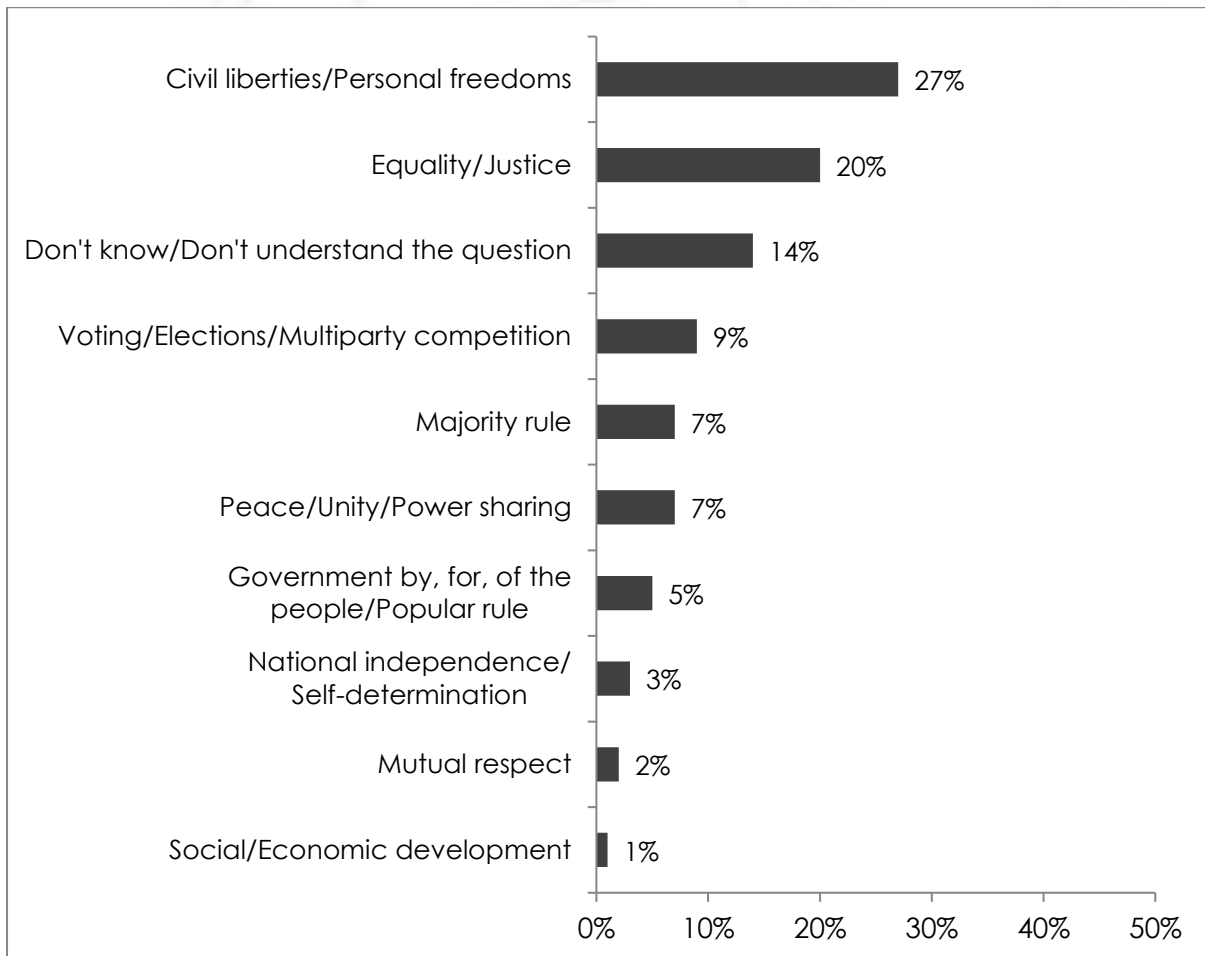
- Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?
- The army comes in to govern the country?
- Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything?

(% of respondents who "disapprove" or "disapprove strongly")

Meaning of democracy

Popular perceptions of and satisfaction with democracy likely depend on what citizens think democracy ought to be. When Egyptians are asked what the word "democracy" means to them, the most frequent response is "civil liberties and personal freedoms" (cited as their first response by 27% of respondents), followed by "equality and justice" (20%) (Figure 7). Only one in 10 (9%) associate democracy primarily with "elections and multiparty competition," while 7% cite "majority rule" and the same percentage mention "peace, unity, and power sharing" and 14% say they "don't know" or "do not understand the question."

Figure 7: Meaning of democracy | Egypt | 2015



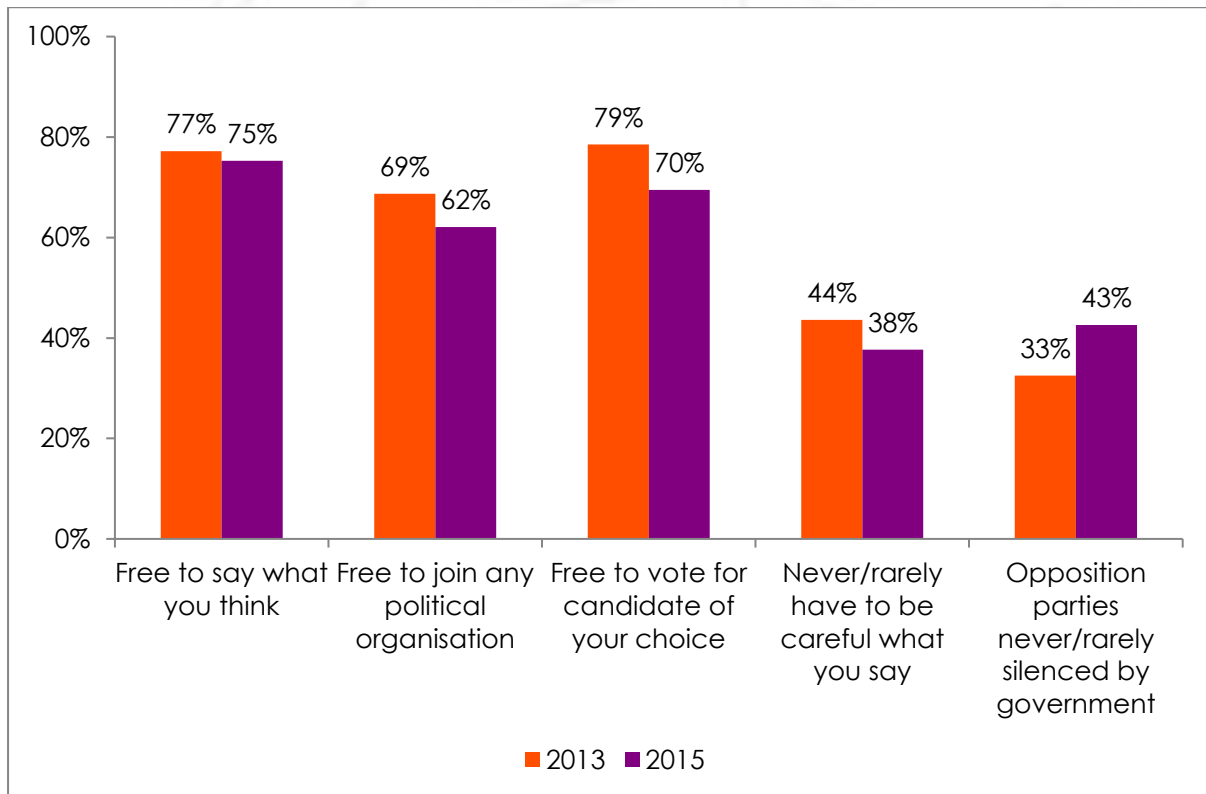
Respondents were asked: What, if anything, does “democracy mean to you?
 (Note: Respondents could give up to three answers. Percentages shown reflect the first answer.)

Personal and political freedoms

If the most common understanding of “democracy” in Egypt is “civil liberties/personal freedoms,” how do Egyptians perceive their freedoms? Majorities of respondents say they feel “somewhat” or “completely” free to say what they think (75%), to join any political organisation (62%), and to choose whom to vote for (70%). But these proportions have decreased compared to 2013, especially with regard to vote choice by 9 percentage points) (Figure 8). Moreover, fewer respondents report that people “never” or “rarely” have to be careful about what to say about politics (38% in 2015 vs. 44% in 2013). Conversely, the perception that opposition parties are “never” or “rarely” silenced by the government has increased, from 33% in 2013 to 43%.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Figure 8: Personal and political freedoms | Egypt | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked:

- In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% who say they feel "somewhat" or "completely" free)
- In your opinion, how often, in this country: Are opposition parties or their supporters silenced by the government? Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?

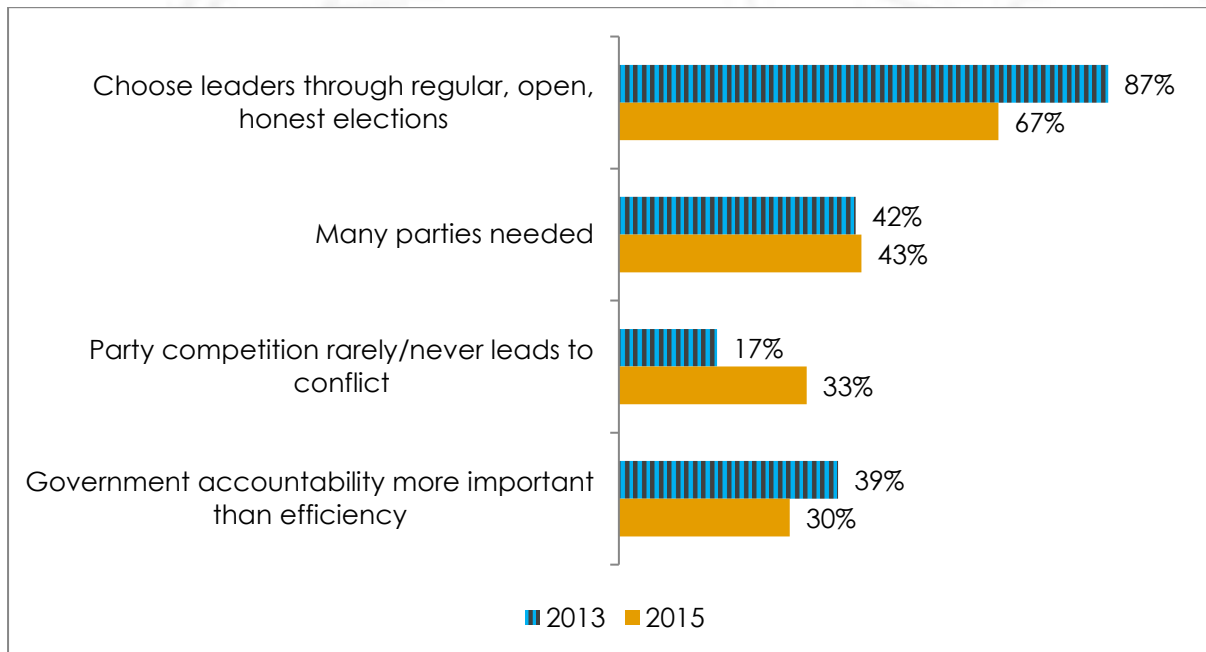
Party competition and accountability

Given the differences in what democracy means to people and changes in perceptions of their democracy, it is worth examining how Egyptians feel about some core democratic concepts, such as free elections, party competition, and government accountability.

Support for regular, open, and honest elections as the best way to choose leaders has declined, from 87% in 2013 to 67% (Figure 9).

Moreover, only about four of 10 Egyptians (43%) support multiparty competition, while about the same proportion "agree" or "agree very strongly" that "since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders." And a slim majority (51%) say that multiparty competition "often" or "always" leads to violent conflict, although the proportion who say this "rarely" or "never" happens has doubled since 2013 (from 17% to 33%).

Figure 9: Perceptions of party competition and government accountability | Egypt
 | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Egypt.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Egyptians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)
- In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict? (% who say "rarely" or "never")
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.
 Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

Perceptions of the president

As discussed above, Egyptians have become less critical of non-democratic political systems, such as one-party or one-man rule, and more open to the idea of choosing leaders through modes other than elections. Does this apparent decline in support for democratic practices reflect changes in their perceptions of their president?

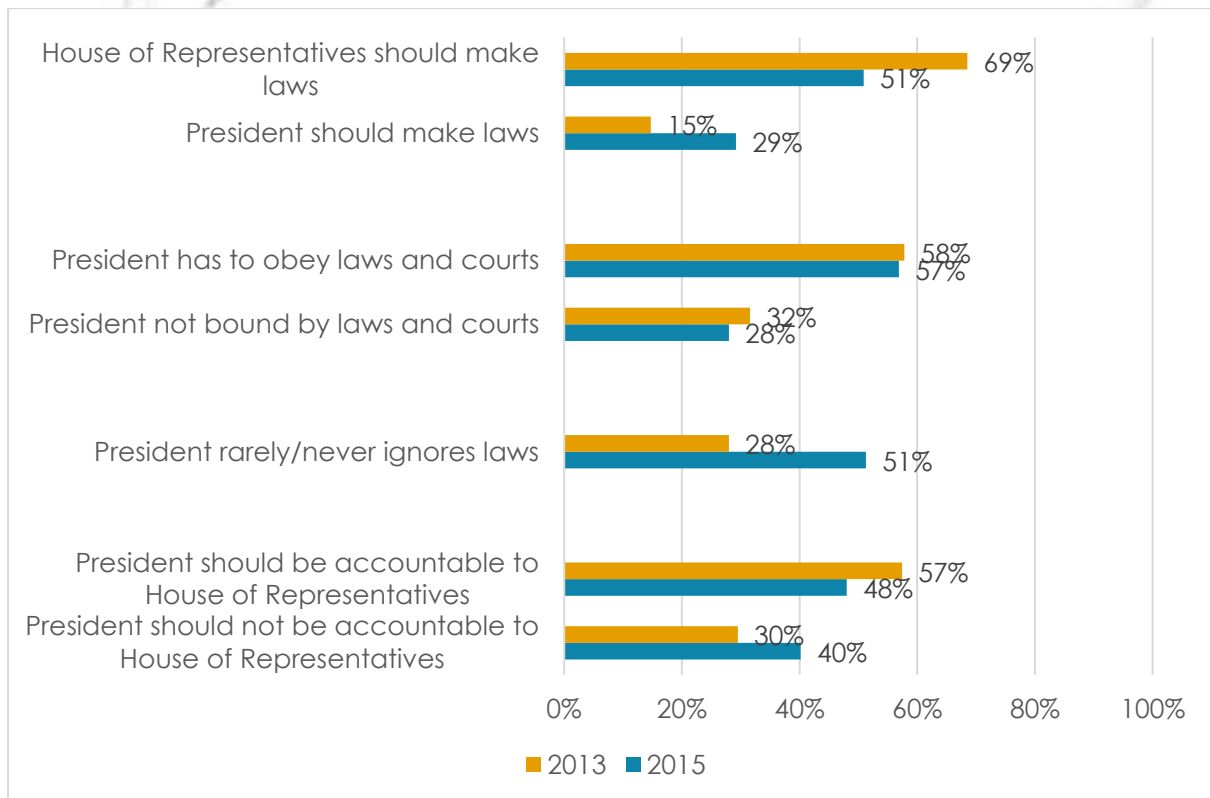
We find a shift in popular views of who should make laws: The proportion who say assign this role to the House of Representatives dropped from 69% in 2013 to a bare majority (51%) in 2015, while the share of respondents who say that the president should make laws almost doubled, from 15% to 29% (Figure 10).

Regardless of who makes the laws, a majority (57%) of Egyptians say the president must obey the laws and courts; the share of respondents who instead believe that the president should not be bound by laws even decreased slightly, from 32% in 2013 to 28%.

About half (51%) of Egyptians say their president in fact “rarely” or “never” ignores the law – an almost twofold increase compared to 2013 (28%), when Morsi was in power.

But a declining number of Egyptians say that the president should be accountable to the House of Representatives for how taxpayers’ money is spent (56% vs. 48%).

Figure 10: Perceptions of the president | Egypt | 2013-2015



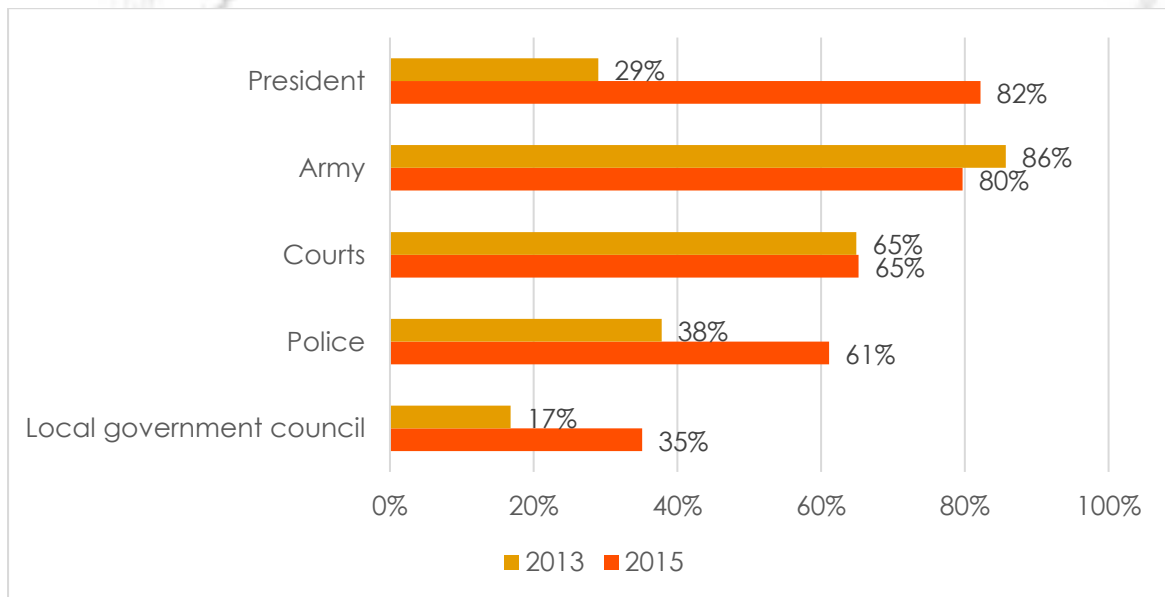
Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Members of the House of Representatives represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the president does not agree.
 Statement 2: Since the president represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what the House of Representatives thinks.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
 Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)
- In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore the courts and laws of the country?
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The House of Representatives should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers’ money.
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

In sum, Egyptians appear to have become more supportive of a strong executive – a trend that may reflect increasing trust that Egyptians place in their president after almost half a decade of political turmoil.

Popular trust in the president almost tripled between 2013 and 2015, shooting up from 29% to 82% of citizens who say they trust him “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 11). This exceeds even public trust in the army, which decreased slightly (from 86% to 80%). Trust in the police and in local government councils also climbed sharply during the period.

Figure 11: Popular trust in government officials | Egypt | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Conclusion

After the uncertainties of the 2011 Arab Spring and the toppling of longtime leader Hosni Mubarak, many Egyptians saw the ascent of President al-Sisi as a chance for greater stability. Despite considerable international criticism of al-Sisi, after his first year in office we find sharp increases in the number of Egyptians who say that their country is democratic and who are satisfied with the way democracy is working. Yet Egyptians also feel less free than in 2013, and support for democracy and multiparty elections remains low compared to other African countries. Somewhat surprisingly, Egyptians also report more accepting attitudes toward one-party rule and one-man rule, and a growing number of citizens voice support for a strong president who makes laws and, though bound by courts and laws, is not accountable to the House of Representatives. One explanation might be the dramatic increase in popular trust in the president, which has surpassed public confidence in the army, police, and courts but is also subject to the ever-changing winds of politics.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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