

Lifestyle | Features

In Egypt, the president is a Ramadan TV hero

As Egyptians mark the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, they are being treated to a blockbuster TV series that celebrates their army marshal turned president, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Fans hail "Al-Ikhtiyar 3" (The Choice 3) for enlightening the masses about Egypt's turbulent recent history. Critics see it as propaganda by a regime that rules with an iron fist.

While the first two seasons paid tribute to soldiers who battle Islamist extremists and to national security agents, the third has the 67-year-old Sisi as its central character. The 30 episodes-watched by millions after the traditional iftar sunset meals-trace the path of the then-defense minister who in 2013 deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi on his path to becoming head of state.

Sisi himself told a reception this week that Al-Ikhtiyar "tells exactly what happened at the time". Sahar Salaheddine, a columnist for state-owned newspaper Al-Gomhuriya, praised the army-sponsored series for "showing the love the people have for their president", and the actors for being "soft power... soldiers". The lead actor Yasser Galal has by all accounts mastered Sisi's mannerisms, his slightly arched eyebrows, pursed lips and signature whisper.

But, whatever Galal's acting skills, criticizing his performance can be dangerous. The Egyptian Front for Human Rights said

that lawyer Nabil Abu Sheikha, after mocking the show on Facebook, was detained on April 11, accused of "disseminating false information" and belonging to a "terrorist" group. While state prosecutors did not comment on the case, local media reported, citing unnamed "security sources", that Abu Sheikha was being prosecuted for an old case, without mentioning details. Writer Shady Lewis Botros argued in an editorial that Galal's performance evoked "equal amounts of admiration and ridicule" and that, "like the regime's entire propaganda machine, it becomes a mechanical replication of itself".

'Educate new generation'

The film studios of Cairo, long regarded as the Hollywood of the Arab world, have made on-screen heroes of Egyptian presidents before. In 1996, "Nasser 56" told the story of Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal in a two-and-a-half-hour black and white epic. In 2001, his successor Anwar al-Sadat got his own biopic, "Days of Sadat". But Al-Ikhtiyar isn't looking to the past, said one of its screenwriters, Baher Dowidar. He argued the series will serve as nothing less than "a history book" 50 years from now.

The goal, argues the local press, is to "educate the new generation" about Egypt, where over half of the 103-million-strong population is under 25. Those who do not



Vehicles drive along a highway beneath a billboard showing an advertisement for the Ramadan television series "Al-Ikhtiyar 3" (The Choice 3) with Egyptian actor Yasser Galal posing as President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in the Egyptian capital's twin city of Giza. — AFP

remember the summer of 2013 must be shown "the state's efforts to protect them from terrorism", said one state-owned newspaper.

'Unforeseeable turmoil'

The show is a fictionalized look at the final 96 hours in power of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Morsi, who was elected in 2012 following the Arab Spring

protests and who died in prison in 2019. The army deposed Morsi then violently crushed protests by his supporters in what Human Rights Watch called "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history". A highlight of the TV show, the trailers promised, was to be a series of leaked videos purportedly exposing Muslim Brotherhood leaders including Morsi. One clip of apparently

real-life footage shows Morsi warning the late field marshal Mohamed Tantawi, who was then the de facto president, of "unforeseeable turmoil" if he did not win the presidential election.

Though the series never sources the footage, it appears to have been shot by the military without the Islamist leaders' knowledge. Lawyer Sherif Gadalla has said in an official complaint that he believes the video shows that Tantawi used to "secretly record his visitors", and argues that the footage should never have been leaked.

An ardent Sisi supporter, Gadalla targets the show's director and producer, not the government, reasoning that "the Egyptian state apparatus is far too intelligent to be the source of the leaks". A very different reaction to the show came from another lawyer, Khaled Ali, a prominent figure on the left. He argued that the show, if indeed historically accurate, proves the innocence of his client Abdelmoneim Aboul Fotouh. The lawyer argued that the series backs the claim of Aboul Fotouh, who ran unsuccessfully against Morsi in the election, that he had no financial ties to the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and announced plans to submit four episodes of the show as evidence to the court. — AFP



In this file photo tourists disembark after a boat ride in the old town of Chania on Crete Island as the tourist season has started on the island.



In this file photo tourists and locals sit at a restaurant cafe in the old town of Chania on Crete Island as the tourist season has started on the island. — AFP photos

Calling cooks and cleaners: Greece tourism hit by staff shortages

50,000 mainly kitchen and service staff. "Our quality tourism is in danger," he tweeted earlier this month. The shortage threatens to stymie a positive start to the season, helped along by Greece's decision to open up in March, two months earlier than in 2021.

In a bid to further boost visitor numbers, the government in February scrapped mandatory screening tests for travelers who hold a European vaccination certificate. And vaccine passes will no longer be

fled to Greece since Russia's invasion in February. Seremetis is not opposed to the idea, provided the refugees can speak English. But few Ukrainians have so far travelled to Crete, he said.

'We can't do better'

The war has also dented tourist numbers to Greece. The conflict has meant the loss of some 600,000 Russians and 240,000 Ukrainians who have cancelled reservations, Lyssandros Tsilidis, head of



In this file photo tourists sit at a restaurant in the old town of Chania on Crete Island as the tourist season has started on the island. — AFP photos

required in restaurants, bars and shops from May 1, while mandatory masks indoors will be scrapped from June 1. Vertakis said the loosening of restrictions had raised hopes in the industry of a return to 2019 levels, when 33 million tourists had visited.

"But without staff to accommodate this many people, it will be a problem," she said. Nektarios Seremetis, who manages the restaurants and bars at the four-star Thalassa Beach Resort down the same coast, is three waiters short. "Those who worked for us in 2019 left and found jobs in Cyprus or Italy, where salaries are higher," he said.

Tourism Minister Vassilis Kikilias last month suggested some of these vacancies could be filled from among the over 22,000 refugees from Ukraine who have

the Federation of Travel Agencies of Greece, told AFP earlier this month. At the Chryssi Akti hotel in Crete, Alexandros Pantelakakis has mostly resigned himself to minding the parasols and lounge chairs on his own this season.

Pantelakakis said many Greeks, including the man normally helping him out on the beach, did not receive enough state support to cope through two pandemic-shortened work seasons. "They hadn't made enough social insurance payments these past two years to earn unemployment benefits," Pantelakakis said. "So when the tourism season (in 2020 and 2021) was cut short by the pandemic, many had to find jobs elsewhere," he said. — AFP

for in the final FBI report in regards to the analysis of the firearm, the munitions, the latent prints and DNA. "We're also waiting on the office of the medical investigator to complete their report and analysis of a little bit more cell phone data." Cinematographer Hutchins, 42, died after being hit by a live round that came from the gun Baldwin was holding as he rehearsed on the New Mexico set in October.

Baldwin, who was a producer as well as the star of the movie, had been told the gun was safe and has previously said he did not pull the trigger. Footage released by the sheriff's department show first responders rushing to treat Hutchins, as well as a dazed Baldwin's first encounters with law enforcement. Other clips, apparently from the now-abandoned movie, show the Hollywood star in period dress sitting in the pew of the wooden church



This handout shows actor Alec Baldwin being processed after the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins at the Bonanza Creek Ranch in Santa Fe, New Mexico. — AFP

and pulling out the Colt gun, which he points in the direction of the camera. The moment of the shooting, in which director Joel Souza was also hurt, is not seen.

Criminal charges

Strict measures are supposed to be in place on movie sets to prevent tragedies, including the exclusive use of dummy or

Psychologist testifies that Amber Heard has personality disorders

A psychologist hired by lawyers for "Pirates of the Caribbean" star Johnny Depp testified on Tuesday at his defamation case against his former wife Amber Heard that she suffers from twin personality disorders. Shannon Curry, a clinical and forensic psychologist, said she had examined Heard's mental health records and personally evaluated her for 12 hours over two days in December 2021.

Curry said it was her opinion that the 36-year-old actress, who had a starring role in the movie "Aquaman," has borderline personality disorder and histrionic personality disorder. "She obtained scores that were consistent with those diagnoses," Curry said. Lawyers for Heard sought to discredit Curry's testimony during cross-examination, noting she had been hired by Depp's attorneys to testify on his behalf. "If you did not find something that would be in favor of Mr Depp and negative to Miss Heard than you wouldn't be an expert in this case?" Elaine Bredehoff, an attorney for Heard, asked Curry. "I present science regardless of what that science may be," Curry responded.

Curry said some of the primary characteristics of borderline personality disorder include a "lot of inner anger and hostility," a tendency to be "self-righteous" and "fluctuating moods." "They can react violently, they can react physically," she said. "Oftentimes they will be abusive to their partners." "It's almost play-acting," she said.

Curry, who has experience with US combat veterans, said it was her opinion that Heard did not suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the result of alleged domestic abuse. Heard had "grossly exaggerated" her symptoms of PTSD in a test she was given, she said. The 58-year-old Depp has denied ever being physically abusive towards Heard and has claimed repeatedly at the trial that she was the one who was frequently violent.

'Washed-up actor'

Depp filed a defamation suit against Heard over a column she wrote for The Washington Post in December 2018 in which she described herself as a "public figure representing domestic abuse." Heard never named Depp but he sued her for implying he was a domestic abuser and is seeking \$50 million in damages. The Texas-born Heard countersued, asking for \$100 million and claiming she suffered "rampant physical violence and abuse" at his hands.



US actor Johnny Depp (left) and his attorney Camille Vasquez in the courtroom at the Fairfax County Circuit Courthouse in Fairfax, Virginia. — AFP photos



Actress Amber Heard talks to her attorney in the courtroom at the Fairfax County Circuit Courthouse in Fairfax, Virginia.

Depp, a three-time Oscar nominee, and Heard met in 2009 on the set of the film "The Rum Diary" and were married in February 2015. Their divorce was finalized two years later. Heard's attorneys have alleged that Depp would become a physically and sexually abusive "monster" when he was drunk or on drugs, and pressed him extensively about his drug and alcohol use during his three days of cross-examination on the witness stand. Also testifying Tuesday was Tara Roberts, who for the past 15 years has managed a private island in the Bahamas owned by Depp.

Roberts was asked by Depp's lawyers to recount details of an argument the couple had on the island one evening. "Amber was telling him that he was a washed-up actor," Roberts said. "He was going to die a lonely old man." She said Heard was yelling at Depp, grabbing at him and trying to pull him back into their house.

Roberts said she was "worried" about what might happen and took Depp to a cafe on the island and applied ice to an injury he had received to the bridge of his nose. Depp filed the defamation complaint in the United States after losing a separate libel case in London in November 2020 that he brought against The Sun for calling him a "wife-beater." — AFP

Alec Baldwin deadly shooting: Probe nearly finished, says sheriff

The criminal investigation into the fatal shooting on a US movie starring Alec Baldwin is "nearing completion," the officer leading the probe said Tuesday. Santa Fe Sheriff Adan Mendoza's comments come as his department released a trove of materials around the incident that claimed Halyna Hutchins' life on the set of low-budget Western "Rust," including footage of Baldwin apparently practicing with the gun that killed her. "We've estimated a time frame...in weeks and not months," Mendoza told broadcaster ABC.

"There's a few things that we're waiting

blank rounds in any production involving firearms. But a health and safety probe by New Mexico officials, which levied a fine of over \$136,000, said last week that producers had shown "plain indifference" to these protocols. Mendoza said Tuesday the provenance of the live round that killed Hutchins was "one of the key questions" of the criminal probe.

"Nobody's come forward and admitted to bringing ammunition to the set," he said. The raft of materials includes messages from Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, the young armorer who was responsible for weaponry on the set, that refer to the use of live rounds on another movie. "That's concerning, because it was just a few months before the production of 'Rust' went into effect," Mendoza said. "And these are some of the same employees and people that played a role in the 'Rust' production." — AFP