

Sisi's Supporters

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Brief Analysis

To measure Sisi's popularity during the recent Egyptian presidential elections, supporters and opponents of President al-Sisi both published photos: of crowded polling stations, or of empty polling stations. Sisi's opponents did not limit themselves to publishing pictures of empty polling stations and stories of forced mobilization on the part of the government. Rather, they took one step further and accused everyone who voted for being "a panderer," "a tramp," "a mercenary," or "a sell-out."

The accusations are directed to the idea that he rules with an iron fist, and that anyone who supports him is either scared and repressed or out for purely personal gain. But it is neither accurate nor fair to say that Sisi no longer has any popular support, and the belief that anyone who supports him is a mere sell-out is false. Perhaps the media contributed to creating this impression of Sisi supporters. Many of those who praise the president in the media today are the same people who praised the Muslim Brotherhood, and if a leftist were to take power tomorrow, most of them would march in the streets with pictures of Marx.

However, those "media personalities" who are supporters of the authorities (any authorities), cannot be portrayed as Sisi's only supporters. Instead, there is a wider spectrum of society that supports him for various reasons. In order to understand the current Egyptian political scene, we must divide this spectrum into segments, in a way that allows us to identify the real reason for their support of Sisi. Some of the main segments are: public servants (especially the police, the army, and the judiciary), Copts, and the "Couch Party."

First: State Institutions:

The Policy

The police and their families constitute a non-negligible portion of the population. Given that they and their families occupy influential and sensitive positions in the Egyptian street, their importance transcends those numbers. Most members of the security forces owe their loyalty to the man who restored their prestige in Egypt, which had been eroded by the January 25 Revolution and the subsequent burning of Interior Ministry headquarters. This prestige has always been considered the most important distinguishing feature of officers throughout the ages in Egypt, and its restoration represents a "favor" from Sisi that is worthy of thanks and gratitude from both the officers and their families.

The Army

The armed forces, including both officers and non-commissioned officers as well as their families, have additional reasons to support Sisi. Since he started ruling, he raised their salaries significantly and rearranged the command hierarchy, and restored the status of the military uniform, which had declined in the Egyptian street in the last ten years of Mubarak's rule in favor of the Interior Ministry. More importantly, Sisi succeeded in associating himself as a ruler with the military establishment," reinforcing the idea in their collective consciousness that he is "one of us." Therefore, supporting him is a national duty, and is tantamount to supporting the state and the army, which protects the state in the first place.

The Judiciary

Judges and prosecutors are not supposed to engage with or get involved in politics. Nevertheless, the unprecedented increase in death sentences and prison sentences in cases of a political nature— (including 900 death sentences in four years has created the impression that the judges stand with the president and support him against all opponents. This sense is bolstered by the open conflict between the judiciary and former president Mohamed Morsi during the period of his rule, which culminated in the siege of the Supreme Constitutional Court in January 2013 by his supporters and the prevention of judges from entering it to hear the claim to invalidate the Shura Council and the Egyptian Constituent Assembly of 2012.

Second: The Copts

The vast majority of Coptic community support President Sisi and deeply respect him, considering him as a "savior" from the threat of Islamist rule. Many actually left the country after the January 25 Revolution because of the rise to power of the Islamists in 2012, when the Salafists called for millions to "protect Egyptian Islamic identity." The scene was absolutely terrifying for Copts – Saudi Arabian flags and black banners being raised in Tahrir Square, beards, and short galabiyas, and the deafening chants of "Islam is coming." When the Muslim Brotherhood and took control of the parliament with the Salafists the alarm felt by the Copts paved the way for treating Sisi as their savior. Furthermore, Sisi succeeded in sending a better message to the Copts than his predecessors, speaking of them with more affection, always emphasizing that he is responsible for each and every Copt, visiting the cathedral on holidays and explicitly calling before the cameras for permission to be granted for churches to be built in the new cities.

In short, Sisi succeeded in sending reassuring messages to most Copts. Within this substantial support bloc, it is certainly possible to find opponents of Sisi among Coptic youth, most of whom have revolutionary inclinations or reject the power of the church and the state, but the vast majority of Copts both support and love the President.

Third: The Couch Party

But the largest and most important segment of Sisi supporters are the group the media refer to as the "Couch Party": ordinary people who are not involved in political life or public affairs, and whose main sources of information are talk shows. They are not driven to political acquiescence by the fear of arrest, because they do not pose a security threat that would warrant them being targeted. Rather, they fear other things. Some of them fear that Egypt will meet the same fate as Syria and Iraq, where civil war looms and scenes of refugees standing in lines are commonplace. As a result of fear and the media, they associate the revolution with civil war, abandoning the slogan of "change" for the slogan of "stability," with "stability" being directly associated with the army, which is associated with Sisi. This results in the deeply entrenched conviction in their collective consciousness that the presence of Sisi and the Egyptian army are the only guarantee of the protection of the country from the fate of Syria and Iraq. Their support of Sisi is for the sake of Egypt's survival and protection.

There is another segment that, while Muslim, feared Egypt would become another Iran when the parliament was full of bearded men calling to prayers. A large part of this segment had supported the revolution. But two years later,

their feeling that it had been hijacked by Islamist organizations that do not accept the civil state and aspire to impose religious rule in Egypt led them to support the *tamarod* or rebellion movement, and join the counter-protests that ultimately led to the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood. This segment leans towards Sisi, and believes that his absence would automatically mean the return of the Muslim Brotherhood -- in light of the failure of the “civil movement” to even present a coherent vision of the future.

Thus, we are dealing with a president that is supported by some key institutions and -- despite the deterioration of the economic situation during his rule --, by most Copts and many in the Muslim majority as well. The delusion here lies in the insistence of his opponents on portraying him as ruling with an iron fist, without enjoying any popular support. Moreover, even more puzzling is that, instead of mobilizing to attract new supporters, they prefer to consider anyone who supports Sisi as a sell-out, ignoring the fact that the fear of religious rule or of meeting the same fate as Syria and Iraq is a natural human fear that needs reassurance and explanation, not insults and sarcasm. ❖

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