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Assurances from Washington, Fears in Cairo

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Brief Analysis

June 13, 2017

“I just want to let everybody know that we are strongly supporting President Sisi; he has done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation. We stand with Egypt, and we support the people of Egypt.” With these words, the U.S. President Donald Trump welcomed his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah Sisi, a welcome mixed with a clear declaration of support for the Egyptian regime. It was precisely what Sisi wanted.

Since Sisi’s ascendancy to power during the tumultuous ousting of the Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi, opinion has been sharply divided over him. Some see him as the nation’s deliverer from religious rule, while others see him as the perpetrator of a coup who has shed the blood of hundreds and seized power by force. This split has been discussed both locally and internationally. Yet, soon he was recognized by the Arab countries, then the European countries, one after the other, while Washington remained opposed. Of course, it did not announce its animosity towards him, but at the same time, the former president Barack Obama did not conceal his irritation with Sisi and the way he came to power. Thus, it was not a surprise that Sisi expressed his hopes that Trump would win the last election. And when he did win, Sisi was among the first to congratulate him.

It seemed obvious that the Egyptian media exaggerated the importance of the president’s visit to Washington, which merely reflected the importance of this visit for the ruling regime. Sisi is betting on Trump, not only by earning confirmation and support for his legitimacy, but also by securing Trump’s support through the economic situation he faces today – the greatest dilemma that keeps the Egyptian president awake at night.

All signs indicate that Sisi’s visit was a huge success. He obtained the American political support that he wanted, which placed him in negotiations with some donors and those close to the president. The media stated that he succeeded in obtaining a promise from Trump not to reduce American military aid to Egypt. These same sources were skeptical about the possibility of attracting American investments to Egypt, which was the third request that Sisi brought to the table.

While this visit led to rejoicing among the president's supporters, it has caused serious concerns for the opposition, especially among those who care about human rights in Egypt and who fear the potential consequences. Many of them expressed clearly on social media their concern regarding Trump's support for Sisi in such an open and explicit way, which could have adverse effects on civil liberties in Egypt. This fear spreading among human rights activists has some validity. For a long time, each successive Egyptian regime became accustomed to taking into account American and Western pressure on human rights issues. There was always the vague appearance of representative democracy: the existence of oppositional political parties, an independent press, bickering members of Parliament, human rights centers, and a civil society that was active to a reasonable extent. Of course, there was no real democracy, nor any actual rotation of power. However, the Egyptian system used to always work at improving its image in the eyes of the West. Thus, through providing a superficial margin of freedom, it allowed journalists and human rights advocates to work and move about in Egypt and abroad.

In spite of this, however, when Sisi came to power he adopted a vision different from his predecessors. He exploited the current international situation to promote the idea that he is a leader fighting against terrorism. Thus he does not afford the media and human rights advocates the opportunity to obstruct him, nor to spread and incite public discord against the state.

Over time, Sisi was able to restore much of a lost sense of security and control over the rhythm of the street, which created a relatively stable situation that comforted citizens to an acceptable extent. At the same time, however, crippling economic crises emerged. The sense of poverty became aggravated with Egypt's implementation of the International Monetary Fund requests aimed at reducing economic subsidies, followed by the adjustment of the exchange rate between the Egyptian pound and the U.S. dollar. This is when criticisms were raised, not only directed at Sisi's position on civil liberties but also at his economic decisions, seen by some as disastrous. Next came the Tiran and Sanafir Islands crisis, during which he suddenly decided to hand over the strategic islands to Saudi Arabia, igniting violent public outrage. It further worsened the relationship between Sisi and the activist segments of the population, translating into more violence on behalf of the state, which extended beyond arrests and trials. This, in turn, raised more voices of opposition, not only from activists, but also from journalists, human rights advocates, and civil society organizations.

Then came Trump's victory, which was met with resounding joy among Sisi's supporters in Egypt and with real fear among those opposed to the regime and those calling for democracy. There are many similarities between the two presidents, from their stances on political Islam to the way they deal with the media. These qualities have led to a rapprochement between the two countries politically, and may also help Sisi gain more confidence generally. This is exactly what the opposition fears. According to Ahmed Fawzi al-Qiyadi of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, that confidence has translated into "more oppression."

However, political researcher Muhammed Naeem has a different opinion. He believes that it is too early to judge the effects of Sisi's visit on the state of civil liberties. Naeem is not alone in these thoughts, as there are a number of activists who note that civil liberties in Egypt now have sunk to their lowest levels and that Trump's support for Sisi will not make a noticeable difference. If anything, it will make the administration more confident in crushing its opponents.

In a related matter, not even two days had passed since Sisi return's from the United States when everyone was shocked by the Palm Sunday explosions at two churches in Tanta and Alexandria, which claimed the lives of 43 people and injured 120 others. Wilayat Sinai, an Egypt-based affiliate of ISIS, quickly claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack. Unfortunately, this incident is not the first time the Egyptian Copts have been attacked by ISIS. Last February, Wilayat Sinai targeted Coptic areas in the Sinai city of El-Arish. They then killed seven Copts before issuing a statement warning them to either leave El-Arish or die. So that they might escape the suffering caused by ISIS's

threats, 120 Christian families left their city and lives behind, emigrating to a quarter of the city of Ismailia, without any support from the Egyptian state.

Then there was the state's reaction to the church bombings, which came out of anger and frustration. This was clear in Sisi's decision to bring in the army to secure vital areas. During the president's appearance on TV screens that evening, he declared a national state of emergency. The announcement was mixed with harsh criticisms of the media. "They repeated the day's events without end, showing the explosions without deference to the victims and to Egyptians' feelings," the president stated.

Sisi's decision did nothing but increase the fears of journalists and human rights advocates. Egypt has returned to a familiar state of governance, to the system of martial law that marked the thirty year reign of Hosni Mubarak, during which civil liberties were severely restricted. If some see Sisi's decision as merely an administrative change and nothing more, then the reality of the current state of civil liberties has been confirmed: they have sunk to their lowest level, regardless of Trump's support for Sisi or the state of emergency, such that now human rights advocates have no rights left worth defending and no rights left to lose.

From the state's viewpoint, ISIS has embedded itself deep within the country and has begun carrying out terrorist operations in major cities. These considerations led the government to impose the state of emergency in order to maintain the nation's stability, a stability it thought it had achieved over the past two years.

The oddest and saddest part of it all is Washington's ambiguous stance on civil liberties in Egypt. It used to be that the White House was a refuge for human rights advocates, who relied upon it to defend the state of civil liberties in Egypt to the point that the Egyptian government even accused them of recruiting foreign assistance. Today, for those advocates, the US has become one of the largest state supporters of repression and torture.



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