

Sisi's Fracturing Regime

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Egypt's strongman is cracking down ahead of the revolution's fifth anniversary, but the real threat he faces isn't from protests.

Monday marks the fifth anniversary of the Jan. 25, 2011, protests that sparked Egypt's Arab Spring uprising, and the Egyptian government is on edge. Fearing that activists will use the occasion to launch a new round of mass protests, the regime has intensified its crackdown on oppositionists in recent weeks, arresting members of prominent revolutionary organizations, anti-government Facebook page administrators, and critical journalists. The regime has also taken its fight to the mosques, with the minister of Islamic endowments decreeing that protesting on Jan. 25 "contravenes sharia law, as it drags Egyptians into violence."

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi provided perhaps the direst warning about the potential dangers of new civil unrest. In a speech in December, he accused those "calling for a new revolution" of trying to "ruin this country and destroy the people."

Sisi is right to be worried -- but not necessarily about the prospect of renewed protests. While his popularity has declined in recent months due to Egypt's sputtering economy, another mass uprising appears unlikely. Instead, Sisi's vulnerability comes from an entirely different source -- from within his own regime, where new tensions have emerged in recent months.

To be sure, Sisi's anxiety about another mass uprising isn't surprising. It reflects his intimate knowledge of recent Egyptian cataclysms and his perhaps inevitable fear that history could repeat itself. After all, he was Egypt's director of military intelligence when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces responded to the January 2011 uprising by toppling then-President Hosni Mubarak, and he was Egypt's defense minister when the military once again responded to mass protests in June 2013 by ousting the country's first elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi.

That latter decision made him public enemy No. 1 for the Brotherhood, which vowed to avenge Morsi's overthrow. But it also made Sisi a national hero to many millions of Egyptians who feared that the Brotherhood was governing Egypt into the ground, and it carried him to victory in the barely contested May 2014 presidential election. Yet as even Sisi's strongest supporters now admit, his honeymoon period is over. "If his support when he was elected was 93 percent, it is now down to 60 percent," a businessman close to the regime told me in November.

With economic growth slowing, currency reserves falling, inflation rising, and youth unemployment still soaring, Egyptians are feeling the pinch -- and complaining about it more audibly than at any point in the past two years. For the time being, however, there appears to be little popular enthusiasm for another uprising. The experience of the past five years has made many, and perhaps most, Egyptians politically risk-averse, and the absence of any clear alternative to Sisi makes them fear that another uprising could spark significant instability. The severe chaos that has overtaken other Arab Spring countries adds to their sense of caution. Egyptians commonly point to state collapse in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq and embrace their unhappy status quo by comparison.

But new tensions within Sisi's regime could spell instability down the road. Although analysts frequently speak of the country's "deep state" as if it is a unified and omnipotent entity, it is in fact a loose coalition of power centers that includes state bodies such as the military, intelligence, police, and judiciary -- as well as nonstate entities such as the powerful clans of the Nile Delta, tribes of Upper Egypt, private media outlets, and the business community. And while these power centers often have competing interests (for example, the Interior Ministry and the military were rivals during Mubarak's latter years), they unified behind Sisi following Morsi's ouster for one overarching reason: They viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to their respective interests.

In recent months, however, this fear of the Brotherhood's return has diminished. With tens of thousands of Muslim Brothers in prison, its exiled leadership increasingly divided, and fewer Muslim Brothers within Egypt willing to risk getting killed at demonstrations, the organization no longer exists as a coherent entity on the ground.

"We don't hear much about them now," a military general told me in November. "They create some problems...but they see no result from what they are doing."

Without the threat of the Brotherhood to unify the Sisi regime's core power centers, latent tensions are now coming to the fore. The most obvious example is Sisi's deteriorating relations with the business community. While some businessmen were skeptical of Sisi when he took office in mid-2014, the business community responded in virtually unanimous horror when energy tycoon Salah Diab was arrested in early November on charges of financial corruption and possession of illegal firearms.

The problem, multiple Egyptian businessmen told me, wasn't the fact that Diab was arrested -- "we support upholding the law," one told me -- but the manner in which he was arrested. At 5 in the morning, an armed counterterrorism team stormed into Diab's bedroom where he was sleeping with his wife, handcuffed him and his son, and then leaked the photographs to the press.

"It brings back memories from the [President Gamal Abdel] Nasser days, when they took people from their homes at dawn," a businessman told me shortly after Diab's arrest. Practically every businessman with whom I spoke insisted that Diab's arrest likely required Sisi's direct authorization. And while they all expected Sisi to reach out and make amends, Sisi instead seemed to threaten the business community during a speech in Port Said three weeks later. "What are you worried about? Why do you have doubts?" he said sternly. "Work! Build! Construct!...What are you afraid of?"

The businessmen see no alternative to Sisi because they believe that he currently has the upper hand. "People don't like us," one told me. "Nasserists, the left, the media -- they all hate the businessmen." But the episode has stoked significant fear in the community, and economic officials worry that it will drive domestic and foreign investments

elsewhere.

There are also signs of tension between Sisi and the security services. While the security services' activities are opaque, they exert significant influence over the country's private media networks and are likely permitting, if not encouraging, the sudden upsurge in criticism that Sisi has faced in recent months. In this vein, following the arrest of Diab and human rights activist Hossam Bahgat in early November, prominent TV host Lamees al-Hadidi lambasted the government. "We don't need a foreign conspiracy," she said, referencing the regime's penchant for relying on conspiracy theories to explain its various policy failures. "We are the conspiracy itself. We conspire against ourselves!"

And after Sisi warned Egyptians against demonstrating on Jan. 25, TV host Amr Adib (who happens to be Hadidi's husband) criticized Sisi in once-unthinkable terms. "Egypt won't die if you leave," he said on-air. "There are many sons ready to serve the country."

There is also evidence of jockeying among the various security services, which often compete among each other for funds and political influence. Some of this friction is playing out in the newly elected parliament. For example, the Future of the Homeland party, whose success in the recent elections is widely attributed to the domestic intelligence service, the National Security Service (NSS), suddenly withdrew last month from the pro-Sisi parliamentary bloc, which is headed by a former military general. When it rejoined the bloc a few days later, its spokesman explained that the party was holding out for more influence in the bloc's political office, which suggests that the new parliament might provide a venue for mediating these intra-regime differences.

The tensions among the security agencies are even more apparent on Egyptian satellite networks, where specific security agencies are suddenly being criticized quite openly. In late December, TV host Tawfiq Okasha, who has long promoted pro-regime conspiracy theories, claimed during a live television interview with TV host Youssef el-Husseiny that Egypt's General Intelligence Service and the NSS had turned against him after previously offering support. "They took what they wanted and then Okasha became a problem!" he said, explaining that these security services appreciated his hard-line opposition to the Brotherhood during Morsi's presidency. "They were hiding behind me."

The following day, Husseiny urged Sisi to end the NSS's interference in Egyptian politics. To be sure, the security agency's involvement in Egyptian politics is neither surprising nor new. But the fact that an otherwise repressive government is suddenly permitting criticism of specific security services reflects an internal rift.

Perhaps most significantly, foreign officials have reported strains between Sisi and the military. While the military might seem like the president's natural base of support, officials attribute the tension to Sisi's notoriously narrow political circle, which breeds mistrust and perhaps jealousy among other high-ranking officials. Egypt's rising economic and security challenges have only amplified the military's concerns. "[Generals] say that Sisi is isolated and surrounded by guys who don't have answers," one official told me. "They are starting to ask questions. 'Why is Alexandria flooding? Why are Mexican tourists getting killed? This is embarrassing.'" There are also hints of friction within the top brass, with high-ranking generals showing a lack of deference to their superiors during meetings with foreign officials.

It is difficult to assess the depth or urgency of these intra-regime rifts. The Sisi regime's inner workings are barely visible to outside observers, and even members of the core power centers find the current situation confusing. "There is definitely a power struggle," one well-connected businessman told me. "But who are the key actors? You had a system in place [under Mubarak] where the interests were balanced. Then it collapsed during the [2011] revolution, and it's still up for grabs."

For the time being, however, those who are close to the regime don't expect any significant political shake-up, let

alone regime change. "If anything happens to this man, this country will be up shit's creek," a prominent TV host told me in November.

But even if Sisi looks poised to remain on top, he can't rest easily. If the country's economic problems worsen, the TV host warned, Sisi's margin for error will shrink significantly. "The political problems would start in a year," he said.

Then he paused, before wondering nervously whether he was overestimating Sisi's cushion. "I hope it lasts that long."

Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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