Sisi's Fearful Egypt

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Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's extrication, fear is still the primary motivator of Egyptian politics, which does not bode well for fostering stability and inclusiveness.

Two years ago, Islamist political posters plastered Giza's impoverished Omraniya neighborhood. But two weeks ago, as Egyptians went to the polls for the seventh time since the 2011 uprising, a military man's banners monopolized the wall space. "Abdel Fatah al-Sisi knows how to fix the country," shopkeeper Shaaban Hamdy, a Sisi supporter, told me in Cairo last week. Hamdy voted for Mohamed Morsi during the 2012 presidential elections, seeing the Muslim Brotherhood leader as "something new, not the same old [regime]." Yet despite regretting that decision, Hamdy acknowledged that Sisi might not be Egypt's final answer either. "If he fails," Hamdy said, "the people will come again and change him."

For Egypt's military-backed regime, Sisi's overwhelming victory, with 97 percent of the vote, represents the return of stability after three years of tumult, and the generals laugh at the suggestion that Egyptians would ever rebel against a serviceman. But they should not feel so comfortable. For the second time in two years, Egyptians have put their faith in a president whom they barely knew a year before, meaning that the speed with which many Egyptians came to view Sisi as their savior can be followed by an equally quick reversal if he fails to deliver.

Unfortunately, the very circumstances of Sisi's political emergence make it unlikely that he will deliver the more inclusive politics that the 2011 and 2013 popular uprisings demanded. Since removing Morsi from office in his capacity as defense minister last summer, Sisi has been embroiled in an existential conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood: over 2500 demonstrators have been killed in the post-Morsi crackdown, and the Brothers now demand his execution. Sisi thus views freer politics as suicidal, since this would enable the Brotherhood to remobilize, win power, and seek vengeance. And Sisi's campaign promise to enforce the legal ban on insulting the president suggests that he will regard criticism as personally threatening.

Yet Sisi's regime hasn't emerged in a vacuum. It is the product of a political environment that has been severely

polarized, and increasingly violent, since November 2012, when then-President Morsi issued a declaration asserting unchecked executive authority and rushed an Islamist-drafted constitution to ratification. During the ensuing crisis and in the months that followed, the Brotherhood dispatched its notoriously obedient cadres to surround courthouses, attack protesters, and threaten its media critics. Many Egyptians thus came to fear the Brotherhood so profoundly that they welcomed the military's return to politics and cheered the deadly assault on pro-Morsi protests last summer.

But despite the Brotherhood's extrication, fear is still the primary motivator of Egyptian politics, including among Sisi's supporters. In this vein, Egypt's private media fears that Sisi will reinvigorate the state media, and thus backed Sisi unflinchingly to discourage the emergence of competition. "We are the public opinion movers and want the [regime] to approve this," a prominent television presenter told me just after the elections. "So we're going to be friends." Meanwhile, former leaders of Mubarak's now-defunct National Democratic Party (NDP) supported Sisi because they fear the power vacuum that would emerge in his absence. "The two civilian forces are now in prison," a former NDP official told me in March. "The NDP is in a mental prison and the Brotherhood is in real prison, so the military is all we have." Egypt's business community backed Sisi for similar reasons. If Sisi fails, one leading entrepreneur told me, "It will be the end of Egypt."

The economic challenges that President Sisi must confront are daunting. Despite receiving tens of billion dollars in aid from wealthy Gulf states, Egypt's foreign currency reserves have fallen by nearly 50 percent since the 2011 uprising, and successive governments' refusal to reform Egypt's costly food and fuel subsidies has jeopardized its ability to provide for its neediest citizens. Sisi also faces a significant natural gas shortage, which has meant near-daily electricity cuts in recent months. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's ongoing, often violent "anti-coup" activities, as well as the Sinai-based jihadi insurgency, will likely keep tourists away and deter foreign investment for the foreseeable future. And these fiscal problems have created a new fear: that Sisi will try to divert attention from his failures by appointing a scapegoat.

The business community is particularly fearful of this. During a mid-May meeting, Sisi reportedly surprised an assembly of businessmen when he demanded that they establish a 100-billion Egyptian-pound fund for "building Egypt." When one businessman protested that he had "negative bank accounts around the world," Sisi snapped back, saying: "I'm asking you and telling you this, so that when our God inquires on Judgment Day about the reason why I did not knock on all doors, I will tell him: God, I did so, but no one answered me." Many within the business community interpreted this as a threat, and withheld their mobilizing support on the first day of voting to send Sisi a message. A frightened business community will further complicate Sisi's ability to resurrect Egypt's economy.

Indeed, despite electing a strongman, Egypt is unlikely to stabilize anytime soon, and Washington is thus rightly concerned that Cairo's new regime will make matters worse. But while the Obama administration shouldn't condone Egypt's authoritarian trajectory as a "democratic transition," it should be realistic about its capacity for influencing it. The existential conflict between the regime and the Brotherhood significantly limits Washington's ability to encourage political moderation, and withholding the $1.3 billion in U.S. military aid to Egypt will hurt the U.S.-Egyptian strategic relationship without producing democratization. Moreover, given that Egyptians broadly view the military aid as a guarantor of their country's external security, and not a tool for shaping its domestic politics, withholding aid at the very moment that Egypt faces threats on multiple borders will exacerbate popular anxieties in an already fearful country.

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

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