

# The Candidate in His Labyrinth

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Articles & Testimony

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## Egypt's president-in-waiting says he's widely loved, so why does he sleep in an undisclosed location and fear for his life?

In the remote, well-to-do Cairo suburb of Fifth Settlement, the headquarters of former Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's presidential campaign are heavily fortified. Checkpoints cordon off the streets leading up to the four-story villa, and half a dozen armed guards, one of whom holds a semiautomatic weapon in his hands at all times, surround the entrance.

To get into the facility, you must present your ID, pass through a metal detector, don a color-coded visitor's badge, and then be escorted by a campaign staff member through the building. It is a far cry from the campaign atmosphere of 2012, when leading presidential campaign headquarters were guarded -- at most -- by an unarmed desk clerk. But the winner of that election now sits in prison, and though the man who ousted him is a leading presidential contender, he is also a leading target for Muslim Brotherhood supporters eager for vengeance.

Make no mistake: Many Muslim Brothers want Sisi dead. Young Muslim Brothers are especially blunt in this regard. "He should be executed when the coup falls," one 18-year-old Brotherhood activist at Cairo University told me. The Brotherhood's typically cautious leaders are only slightly more circumspect. One top Brotherhood official proposed that, as a first step toward national reconciliation, an "independent committee" would investigate the deadly violence that followed President Mohamed Morsi's ouster, "and the results will be compulsory for everyone, with the killings...considered murders" -- implying that Sisi would be convicted of mass murder and thus put to death.

Muslim Brotherhood officials also speculate on other ways that Sisi's demise could come about. Brotherhood leader Gamal Heshmat, whom I interviewed in Turkey, where he fled post-coup, suggested that Sisi's demise might come from a different source: "Those who are around him" -- meaning other Egyptian officials -- "might kill him in order to find an end to the crisis."

The Brotherhood's blood lust -- as well as rising violence against police and military targets -- has compelled many

Egyptians to support a strongman like Sisi ever more ardently. But despite the ubiquity of Sisi posters and occasional sightings of Sisi-branded cookies and underwear, "Sisi-mania" is a myth.

Instead, Egyptian politics are dominated by a sense of resignation -- a feeling, even among Sisi's backers, that there is simply nobody else. So though many Egyptians view Sisi as their last hope and fully intend to support him, they aren't particularly hopeful. They know that electing a president who is squarely in the cross-hairs of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Brothers is an extremely risky gambit, and they are also leery of handing political power back to the military. But they view Sisi's presidency as far preferable to the total leadership vacuum that they fear would emerge without him.

Of course, the Sisi campaign is most mindful of the significant risk to the candidate's life. When I asked Sisi campaign manager Mahmoud Karem about the security concerns, he was blunt: "I'd advise him against traveling around the country," he said.

According to retired Gen. Sameh Seif Elyazal, who has been among Sisi's most outspoken supporters in the Egyptian media, at least "2 to 3 million" Egyptians actively "hate" the former defense minister. "Everybody knows that he is a target."

As a result, Sisi now sleeps in an undisclosed location. He will also send emissaries into the countryside to stump on his behalf, rather than making campaign appearances.

Whether Sisi can effectively govern Egypt without being able to leave the capital remains to be seen. But his confinement will not prevent him from winning the upcoming presidential election, which is scheduled for May 26 and 27. After all, Sisi's most critical support will come from the big clans and tribes that dominate Egyptian political and social life outside the major cities -- groups that can mobilize a critical mass of voters. Although these familial networks are often referred to as *felool* -- meaning "remnants" of the old regime, due to their support for former President Hosni Mubarak -- they are not primarily ideological. Their key aim is reinforcing their local power, and their main objection to the Brotherhood is that it sought to exclude them from politics under Article 232 of the Brotherhood's 2012 constitution, which banned members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) from entering politics for a decade.

"We spoke with our Islamist counterparts and said, 'If you find that I've been corrupt, take me to court,'" Atef Helal, a family leader in the Nile Delta governorate of Menoufiya, who served in parliament as an NDP member told me. "But saying that all [NDP members] were corrupt is wrong...This was the Brotherhood's biggest mistake."

Helal said the Brotherhood's refusal to work with the big families added to Egypt's post-Mubarak instability. As he put it, "400,000 [Muslim Brothers] can't rule 90 million [Egyptians]."

And though he remains pessimistic about the future -- he says he won't run again for parliament anytime soon, because the country is still too unstable -- he views Sisi as the only person with a remote chance of restoring security.

"There are huge problems in the last three years, so progress declined and there was chaos," he said. "So you need someone from the military to rule the country. Normally, though, I would oppose this."

Cairo-based former leaders of Mubarak's ruling party voiced similarly reluctant support for Sisi. "We never wanted military leaders," a former NDP official told me. "But the two civilian forces are now in prison. The NDP is in a mental prison and the Brotherhood is in real prison, so the military is all we have."

To be sure, many Egyptians respect Sisi. They tout his ouster of Morsi in the wake of mass anti-Brotherhood protests and appreciate his calm, empathetic manner of speaking, which contrasts sharply with Morsi's often laborious bombast. "Sisi comes from a [military] intelligence background, so he has a global vision," Abdel Azim Farid, who chaired the local council in the Nile Delta village of Bagour for 17 years, told me. "I think his [presidential candidacy]

announcement was very clear, and people will be happy to work with him."

But time and again, Sisi's supporters admit that they would have preferred a different candidate. "I wish he would stay as defense minister," Farid said, before adding, "It doesn't mean I'm not happy. I'm not against him."

The non-Islamist business community, which strongly supported Morsi's ouster in July, is equally lukewarm on Sisi. "The amount of cheer that he's received can blow up his mind," said one businessman, who feared that the former defense minister could become a new dictator. "And he's a military guy, so he thinks he knows better."

Despite their misgivings, however, practically every non-Islamist businessman with whom I spoke vowed to contribute to Sisi's campaign. "I don't want him to think that I'm against him," one said. And besides, he worried, what if Sisi fails? "It will be the end of Egypt."

Indeed, the fear of what might come after Sisi permeates every discussion about Egypt's future. His close identification with the Egyptian Army means that Egyptians fear that a blow to one will be a blow to the other -- and this effectively paralyzes even those non-Muslim Brothers who are least enthusiastic about Sisi's presidential ambitions. "If we see demonstrations against Sisi, it will be a disaster," said one Alexandria-based leftist activist who campaigned for Morsi's ouster but now opposes the current regime's repressiveness. "People view Sisi as the military, and if they lose faith in Sisi they will lose faith in the Army, and it's our only institution."

A similarly uneasy leader of the Salafi al-Nour Party in the western Matrouh governorate warned that imprisoning thousands of Islamists has enabled the spread of violent radicalism within the prisons and is thus creating an even more explosive situation. Despite his misgivings, however, he saw no alternative to supporting Sisi. "[We] believe that the Egyptian Army is the only remaining Arab army and must be protected," he said. "Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen -- they've all been destroyed. We support the Army although it made some mistakes, to keep the Egyptian state."

The shallowness of Sisi's support may become even more apparent after he becomes president. Foremost among the challenges he will face will be a natural gas shortage, which is already leading to frequent power outages nationwide, since the fuel is used for generating 70 percent of Egypt's electricity. According to an official in Egypt's Ministry of Petroleum, the country's summer electricity needs amount to 125,000 cubic meters of gas per hour, but it can currently provide only 70,000, and the government's expensive plan to import liquefied natural gas will still leave it 20,000 cubic meters per hour short of what it needs. Some estimates predict that power outages will be extended from two to six hours per day, and the worst outages will hit in the summer, coinciding with Sisi's first months in office.

In all likelihood, these outages will not spark immediate mass protests against Sisi. Egyptians are largely exhausted from the rough-and-tumble of the past three years and are thus willing to give Sisi some leeway. Yet there are two big reasons Egyptian politics will likely remain fluid in the long term.

First, while practically every national leader faces death threats, the fact that hundreds of thousands of Muslim Brothers -- and perhaps a few million of their supporters -- want Sisi dead means that the threat of a game-changing assassination is real and constant, no matter how well Egypt's next president is guarded. Moreover, the kill-or-be-killed dynamic that has defined Egyptian politics since Morsi's ouster in July 2013 is constantly broadening: Pro-Brotherhood forces recently threatened Sisi campaign officials' lives by posting their personal information online.

Second, the threat to Sisi's life means that the autocratic politics that catalyzed uprisings against both Mubarak and Morsi are here to stay. Fearing that the Brotherhood might exploit political openings to return to power and seek vengeance, the current regime is already imposing strict limits on dissent that affect everyone. In recent months, it even arrested those working as oppositionists within the current transition process, detaining supporters of Nasserist presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi and sentencing activists who campaigned against the recently passed constitution to three years in prison.

Indeed, on the eve of Egypt's second presidential election in two years, Egyptian politics are already disastrous -- and also a bigger disaster waiting to happen. Given the existential stakes for every political player, Washington's well-intentioned push for greater political inclusiveness has no shot of success right now. The current regime views efforts to encourage democracy as an underhanded conspiracy to hasten Sisi's demise. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters believe that Washington conspired to remove Morsi and thus view American human rights concerns as disingenuous.

For this reason, Washington won't get the progressive post-Arab Spring Egypt that it rightly wants. Even sadder, neither will Egyptians.

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