

Implications of a Sisi Presidency

by [Adel El-Adawy \(/experts/adel-el-adawy\)](/experts/adel-el-adawy)

Feb 28, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Adel El-Adawy \(/experts/adel-el-adawy\)](/experts/adel-el-adawy)

Adel El-Adawy was a 2013-2014 Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The military chief has some strong assets and likely staying power, but he will still face great pressure if he is elected as anticipated, since the benchmark for success will be his ability to satisfy an Egyptian polity filled with unrealistically high socioeconomic expectations.

The February 24 resignation of Egypt's cabinet has fed expectations that Field Marshal Abdul Fatah al-Sisi will soon announce his bid to run in this year's presidential election. For now, he remains defense minister in the reshuffled cabinet formed by new prime minister Ibrahim Mahlab, but army chief of staff Gen. Sedki Sobhi is expected to replace Sisi once he resigns to seek the presidency.

Egypt's serious socioeconomic problems and security threats will make the next president's job exceedingly difficult. The new leader's ability to sustain the current institutional power configuration will be crucial in a tough domestic and international political environment. In this regard, Sisi's professional background -- as a strongman with close ties to Egypt's military leadership and various Persian Gulf governments -- gives him an advantage over other potential candidates. But he has yet to clearly articulate his views on governance, the economy, and international political issues. His success will therefore require the assembly of a technocratic presidential team ready to make bold decisions and deliver to a people hungry for a better life.

BACKGROUND

In 2011 and 2013, the military and other powerful institutions had reasonable incentives to move against the government. In 2011, Egypt's power centers were divided -- few approved of Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal running for president, and many were frustrated with the ruling family's increasingly overbearing role in the decisionmaking process. In 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood's incompetent and destructive leadership galvanized the state apparatus to support the protestors. In short, the institutional configurations in both situations did not favor those in power at the time.

The reality on the ground is different today, however, as revealed by numerous interviews conducted over the past few months with officials from various Egyptian security agencies. There is clear alignment and consensus among state institutions, especially the security apparatus behind Sisi, who enjoys considerable support from many power centers.

At the same time, the past three years show how quickly public opinion can shift, especially if a government is believed to be ineffective at addressing the country's socioeconomic, security, and political problems. Sisi himself has acknowledged these challenges, and if he becomes president, he will need to deal with a complex bureaucracy in order to resolve the most pressing problems.

The country's crushing socioeconomic burden is the foremost concern, but another factor that could trigger popular discontent with a Sisi-led government is anger at repressive measures against political opponents, especially against nonviolent, non-Islamist critics. At the moment, most Egyptians appear willing to give the government wide berth on this issue, content to accept the collateral damage endured by democracy and civil-society advocates in the fight against the Brotherhood and its fellow travelers. Yet there is an undefined threshold that, if crossed, may tip the balance against popular deference on this issue. Given Sisi's efforts thus far to align the operations of the Interior Ministry and the army, he would likely bear the brunt of such criticism.

THE MILITARY'S GENERATIONAL TRANSITION

In August 2012, Egypt witnessed a major generational transition among its highest military ranks when Sisi and Sobhi rose to the top leadership positions. Many analysts prematurely concluded that the removal of Defense Minister Hussein Tantawi and Chief of Staff Sami Anan was not a significant change, arguing that Sisi represented a continuation of the Tantawi era. Yet while Sisi did enjoy a close relationship with his predecessor, some of his methods for leading the Defense Ministry are profoundly different. In fact, Sisi and Sobhi's ascendance has marked a new era within the military establishment.

Part of this shift is due to the manner in which both men benefited directly from close U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation. Sisi and Sobhi each had the opportunity to study at the U.S. Army War College, familiarizing them with modern American military doctrine and leadership style while fostering strong friendships with U.S. military officers. Yet Tantawi and Anan were mainly exposed to Soviet military doctrine in their formative years, as reflected in their leadership styles.

In addition, military education and training during the Tantawi era were based on traditional warfare, which made the top brass less adaptive to modern transnational threats and rapid technological developments. The rise of nonstate actors, advances in intelligence gathering, and broader transformations in global security dynamics were difficult for the older generation of officers to fully embrace. Today, a younger generation of leaders is taking a much more proactive approach to unconventional security challenges.

In particular, Sisi and Sobhi both understand that the Sinai security threat requires an active military response. The military has undertaken a major, unprecedented, and increasingly effective campaign against terrorist cells in the peninsula and the Gaza smuggling tunnels on which they rely. Over 1,000 tunnels have been destroyed in the past few months, and a buffer zone has been established to limit the activities of jihadists and smugglers at the border. Ahmed Wasfi, the army general in charge of the campaign, is another member of a rising young military leadership that is eager to take on the important Sinai portfolio and much more receptive to focusing on border security and counterterrorism.

Sisi has also established himself as the main interlocutor with regard to U.S.-Egyptian security cooperation. This is different from the Tantawi era, when an older generation of army officers was reluctant to embrace the broader and more flexible security cooperation paradigm Washington sought following the September 11 attacks. Their

reluctance tilted the pillar of U.S. cooperation with Cairo toward former intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, who established himself as the main link in the relationship.

SISI'S LEADERSHIP STYLE

As defense minister, Sisi has shown a much more outgoing leadership style than his predecessors. For example, one of his first decisions was to appoint a young spokesman, Ahmed Ali, to represent the armed forces. At the time, the military was badly shaken by its difficult eighteen-month rule post-Mubarak. Appointing a young officer as the military's public face would have been difficult to imagine during the Tantawi era, but Sisi saw a need to improve relations with the street. According to several senior officers, Sisi also became much more involved than his predecessors in going to the field and surrounding himself with younger officers to boost institutional morale.

In addition, he has moved away from the strictly hierarchical leadership style that gradually disconnected Tantawi from his peers and fostered discontent within the military. Sisi showed more of a team-player approach from the outset, especially given his younger age and his need to gain the respect of more senior peers. For example, his deputy Sobhi is even younger but technically outranked him before their respective promotions. Sisi also made drastic changes to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, assembling a trusted team of handpicked officers.

Sisi's approach quickly earned him popularity and helped him maintain cohesiveness. This was put to the test in the lead-up to last June's mass uprising, when the Brotherhood government attempted to replace him with General Wasfi, his close colleague. That gambit failed, and during a July 4 phone interview broadcast on MBC Masr, Wasfi declared that the military's cohesiveness was unbreakable.

Sisi also appears to have been effective at building coalitions among previously competing institutions. During the Mubarak era, the Interior Ministry and police were used as a counterbalance to the military establishment. As a result, the police grew exponentially, and their relations with the military worsened, hitting an all-time low in 2011.

Since Sisi took over as defense minister, however, the relationship has gradually improved. In the past few weeks, police and military officials have exchanged high-profile visits and offered positive remarks about each other. On January 21, Sisi and a senior military delegation met with senior Interior Ministry officials to mark the upcoming police holiday. At the gathering, he emphasized the importance of their relationship: "The police and military are the real guarantors of Egypt's security and stability...The existing challenges are no doubt immense...and we [military] are right next to you [police] to protect our country...Together, we are capable of delivering even though there are many threats."

Sisi has also demonstrated awareness of the need to show broad political support for major decisions. For example, during the July 3 televised announcement of Morsi's removal, a wide spectrum of public figures and politicians were visible in the background. Sisi even asked for a popular mandate on July 24 to aggressively fight terrorism, making sure that the people would accept the intense crackdown against the Brotherhood leadership.

What is less clear is how vigorously Sisi will tackle Egypt's deep structural socioeconomic problems as president. He has not worked on these issues in the past, nor has he articulated his vision for addressing them in the future. Rather, he has kept a low profile on structural-reform subjects such as subsidies, which are critical for economic progress but very delicate politically. If he tackles these problems head on -- or if he does little and the economy stumbles along -- his popularity may well drop.

CONCLUSION

Field Marshal Sisi is part of a new generation of U.S.-educated Egyptian military leaders who tend to be more adaptive to the fast-changing security threats across the region. His close relationship with various power centers -- especially his same-generation military colleagues -- enhances his prospects of enduring if he becomes president.

Given his extremely good chances of winning the election, it would be shortsighted for Washington to jeopardize its three-decade investment in close relations with Egypt's armed forces by prolonging its military aid suspension. Moreover, Sisi's greater focus on counterterrorism compared to his military predecessors creates an opportunity to better advance mutual strategic security interests.

Adel El-Adawy is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)