

Sisi the Invincible

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#), [Gilad Wenig \(/experts/gilad-wenig\)](#)

Feb 18, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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

[Gilad Wenig \(/experts/gilad-wenig\)](#)

Gilad Wenig is a research associate at The Washington Institute and managing editor of Fikra Forum.



Articles & Testimony

Sisi's military background and his strong support from security and intelligence leaders make another coup less likely in the short term, but continued economic problems could trump even that advantage.

Egyptian Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's quick rise from obscure military bureaucrat to national idol reflects Egypt's popular mood, which, after three-plus years of constant political tumult, desires stability in the form of a strongman. But his sudden emergence also reflects Egyptians' moodiness: Sisi represents 180 degrees of ideological difference from Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader whom Egyptians elected less than two years ago and then toppled 12 months later. So it should come as no surprise if Sisi's support quickly dwindles after he wins the presidency and Egypt again sees mass protests. (It doesn't help matters that, like virtually every other Egyptian political figure, Sisi has no apparent answers for the country's significant economic woes, high youth unemployment, and exclusivist politics.)

Yet that doesn't mean that Sisi will face the same fate as Morsi. Even if Sisi faces an uprising, there are good reasons to think he will be more durable than his ousted predecessors, as well as more durable than the other prospective candidates for Egypt's presidency.

Although Sisi's cult of personality derives from his public role in ousting Morsi on July 3, it is his status as a *ragul dawla* (literally, "man of the state"), that makes him presidential material in the eyes of many Egyptians. With the exception of Morsi, every head of state since the Free Officers revolution in 1952 has emerged from either the military or the judiciary, and those who backed last summer's uprising-cum-coup often attribute Morsi's failures as president to the fact that he is a *ragul al-gamaa* ("a man of the society," meaning the Brotherhood). With violence now on the rise, including increasing terrorist attacks by Sinai-based jihadis and a Brotherhood-backed campaign to

assassinate police officials, the public is calling for a *ragul dawla* to restore order.

Yet even if many Egyptians prefer leaders who are *rigal dawla*, their support for military leaders is not constant. Last March, even as Morsi's popular support declined sharply, only three percent of Egyptians wanted "the defense minister or another military man" as their president, according to a Baseera poll. Sisi's portrait might be featured on pajamas and cookies, but support for him is shallow. A recent poll from the Ibn Khaldun Center, a think tank in Cairo, pegged popular support for his presidential candidacy at 54.7 percent -- not particularly high, considering that there were no other plausible competitors at the time. And given the considerable economic, security, and political challenges that Sisi will face upon becoming president, the small anti-military demonstrations of today could become mass protests tomorrow.

It is tempting to think that such protests could threaten Sisi's hold on power, just as they eventually toppled former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Morsi. But mass demonstrations on their own would not have been enough to boot those two men from power. Both might have managed to stay in office if important state institutions had not had their own parochial reasons for siding with protesters. In 2011, Egypt's top brass ultimately viewed the anti-Mubarak uprising as useful for preventing a man that it did not trust -- the dictator's son Gamal Mubarak, who had no military background -- from succeeding Mubarak. And in 2013, a wide array of state institutions -- particularly the Interior Ministry and judiciary -- actively participated in the anti-Morsi demonstrations, because they feared Morsi's attempts to "Brotherhoodize" them. That raised the prospect of state collapse and propelled the military's intervention after only four days of protests.

By contrast, state institutions would be far less likely to respond to mass protests by removing Sisi, for two reasons. First, the police and judiciary are unified in viewing Sisi's prospective presidency as a bulwark against the Brotherhood and a first line of defense against any Brotherhood-led quest for post-coup vengeance. During a late January Police Day ceremony that Sisi attended, Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim signaled his strong support for Sisi by praising him as a "unique, peerless, insightful, and judicious leader" who has supported the security forces in their efforts to achieve stability, battle terrorism, and maintain the security of Egypt. Egypt's new constitution, which grants unprecedented authority to the police, judiciary, and military, will bolster these institutions' commitment to a regime headed by Sisi, and the defense minister has spent much of the past seven months reaching out to religious figures and security chiefs to ensure their continued support.

Second, Egypt's current military and intelligence leaders would be less likely to move against a Sisi-led regime than they were the Mubarak- and Morsi-led governments. To many of these officials, Sisi is a peer: He is from the same generation as most members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and his personal relations with several of its most influential figures date back decades. For instance, Sisi and his likely successor as defense minister, the military's chief of staff, Sedky Sobhy, have worked together since they both attended Egypt's military academy in the 1970s. Like Sisi, Sobhy began his military career as an infantryman, pursued graduate studies at the Egyptian Command and Staff College, attended the Nasser Higher Military Academy, and completed a fellowship at the U.S. Army War College, in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, much of Egypt's current military leadership just below Sobhy on the chain of command consists of generals who were appointed shortly after Sisi became defense minister in August 2012.

Similarly, personal allies of Sisi occupy top posts within Egypt's influential intelligence community. The director of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), Mahmoud Hegazy, is Sisi's former military academy classmate and infantry colleague, and his daughter is married to Sisi's son. Additionally, the director of Egypt's powerful General Intelligence Service, Mohamed Farid el-Tohamy, reportedly served as Sisi's mentor during Sisi's tenure at MIS, and Tohamy's reputation as a hard-liner against Islamists makes him especially unlikely to move against Sisi in the event of an uprising.

Of course, these relationships will not prevent future unrest, because they have little bearing on Sisi's ability to fix Egypt's battered economy. Despite some positive trends and heavy cash infusions from the Gulf states, Egypt's economic outlook remains bleak. The International Monetary Fund projects a growth rate of 2.8 percent in 2014, which is short of the five percent needed to cut rampant youth unemployment. The interim government's stimulus policy, as well as the lack of revenue from tourism, will further drain Egypt's cash reserves, which dropped from \$18.9 billion in August to \$17.1 billion last month, and further dips over time could complicate the government's ability to buy the fuel that it sells to the public at heavily subsidized rates. The long gas lines and constant electricity cuts that occurred under Morsi could return under Sisi, enraging the public and broadening support for protests. But key state institutions will likely fall in line with the new president, because the cost of another successful uprising would threaten their autonomy and open the door for the Brotherhood's return.

So while Sisi might be more coup-proof than his predecessors, that hardly implies that Egypt will be stable under his rule. To the contrary -- the fact that Egypt's state institutions will be inclined to back Sisi rather than the protesters makes it likely that future uprisings will be brutally repressed. If future President Sisi hopes to avoid this scenario, he has only one option: charting a policy agenda that successfully addresses Egyptians' widely held economic and political grievances. Recent history, however, suggests that it will not be long before the Egyptian public runs out of patience. It may be only a matter of time until the *rigal dawla* and their subjects come to blows.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. Gilad Wenig is a research assistant in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics. ❖

Foreign Affairs

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)