

Policy Alert

Sisi's Reelection and Egypt's Next Political Establishment

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The president now has all the time he needs to continue restocking the political system with handpicked youths while snuffing out the opposition for good.

On April 2, the Egyptian election commission declared that President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi had won a second term with 97 percent of the vote. During his first term, he focused on suffocating the political environment and sidelining his opponents, so his attention will now shift to reconstructing the political establishment. In fact, the seeds of the new political system have already been planted, largely unnoticed in Washington.

Ever since the 2013 coup, Sisi and his allies have sought to destroy the opposition by cracking down on Islamists, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood. The only faction spared was the ultraconservative Nour Party, which supported the coup and provided religious legitimacy to Sisi's government. Similarly, several leftist and liberal opposition members were either driven out of the country or banned from all media services, while the intelligence services began buying or investing directly in press outlets for the first time. The government has also banned all political activities at universities.

Elsewhere, the majority of parliament has been filled with members handpicked by the security services, ensuring that bills act as a mere rubber stamp to Sisi's decisions. Among the new legislation are laws that impose stiff penalties on any citizens who dare to hold unauthorized demonstrations, offering highly restrictive "protest permits" instead.

All of these actions stem from an inherent belief that political bickering and politics in general are a distraction to the country. Sisi himself seems to despise politicians, casting them as self-serving, hypocritical, and corrupt; in his view, the establishment that came to dominate Egypt after President Anwar Sadat reopened the political sphere in the 1970s has outlived its purpose.

At the time, Sadat reintroduced political parties to provide an aura of legitimacy and window-dressing democracy. Over time, however, the opposition carved out a sizable political role that culminated in the 2011 revolution. According to Sisi and his allies, that uprising almost destroyed the state and the military by bringing the Muslim Brotherhood to power; they now fear that maintaining such wide political space could result in another uprising.

Hence, Sisi envisions refilling the political sphere with "loyal, patriotic" youths chosen by the security services and the president's office. These youths would replace the old-guard elites who began their careers in the 1970s.

After the death of former president Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egyptian leaders struggled to articulate a political ideology capable of competing with leftists, Islamists, and liberals. Sisi has taken notice of his predecessors' failure and is building the new establishment around issues such as fighting terrorism and protecting the homeland from a perceived axis of evil, foreign conspiracies, and fourth-generation warfare—in other words, he believes the solution lies in whipping up ultranationalist sentiment.

The government has been working on this plan for a while, announcing its first "National Youth Conference" in January 2016 and holding it in Sharm al-Sheikh that October. The media department of the President's office organized the event in partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Presidential Leadership Program, and other agencies. The estimated 3,000 participants included university students, athletes, intellectuals, and budding politicians; they attended lectures delivered by around 300 "experts" and public figures. At least three other domestic youth conferences have been held since then.

The backbone of these events is the Presidential Leadership Program, founded in September 2015 with the goal of creating new political leaders. Participants in the nine-month program are divided into groups and placed in workshops on economics, media, political science, strategy, and national security. According to a November 2017 interview with Education Minister Tarek Shawki, two classes have graduated from the program so far, and twenty-two of its alumni are currently working in various ministerial positions.

Sisi's long-term goal is to create a political class completely free of the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition members. This vision may start coming to fruition during the next local elections, which the government has repeatedly postponed until it prepares suitable candidates—namely, participants in the Presidential Leadership Program and the youth conferences. Minister of Local Development Abubakr al-Gendi indicated that parliament would pass the implementing legislation related to management of these elections after the presidential vote.

Regardless of Washington's feelings toward the Sisi government, nurturing this new political generation and engaging them during their formative years could help U.S. officials reestablish influence in Cairo. This includes inviting them to the United States through State Department public diplomacy initiatives such as the International Visitor Leadership Program. Any such efforts are more likely to succeed if done in cooperation with the Egyptian government.

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