

Position Paper

Faltering Authority: Sisi's Rule in the Face of Polarisation

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Al Jazeera Center for Studies***

Translated into English by:

6 MAY 2014





Abdel Fattah El-Sisi [Reuters]

Abstract

Starting July 2013, Egypt began to experience unprecedented polarisation and civil strife. The country has not experienced this level of violence, arbitrary detention and even killing in recent history, and Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has responded by imposing an increasingly tightening security strategy. In the short term, this strategy will strengthen his opponents and increase his isolation – his policy of indiscriminate repression has widened the coalition of those opposed to his authority. The opposition, then, is no longer limited to the Muslim Brotherhood and now includes revolutionary youth groups as well as labourers, students and others. Furthermore, Sisi's isolation of those who helped him overthrow Morsi has cost him political capital needed to extend his authority and isolate his opponents.

Introduction

Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's response to Egypt's unprecedented state of polarisation and civil strife has been an increasingly tightening security strategy. Sisi has pursued a strategy comprised of repressing the coup's opponents and weakening the Muslim Brotherhood and rooting them out of political life. All of this is part of his larger project for Egypt based on restoring military rule in the country.

Sisi's strategy is based on three key axes, first and most important of which is the myth of "the saviour," with Sisi portrayed as the only one capable of solving the problems plaguing Egypt. He currently enjoys sweeping popularity absolving him of the need to

present a program or vision or even make pledges. This is because he is seen as a desirable candidate, one that will save the country from civil war and save the army from those plotting against it.

The second axis is based on scapegoating a specific party so that popular anger and frustration are directed towards one “enemy”. This “enemy”, domestic or foreign, gives Sisi the freedom to suppress and eradicate one group without being concerned about the social, economic and future costs of this tactic or the number of victims it will claim. For example, Sisi blamed unnamed local, regional and foreign enemies for Egypt’s problems in a March 26 speech.

Finally, military leaders have created conditions that ultimately justify Sisi’s grip on power – by imprisoning, discrediting or marginalizing all civil society elites, they are trying to sell Sisi as the only leader suitable to handle the current situation. Part of this axis is convincing the public that military leaders are only following the road map presented on 3 July 2013, including a constitutional referendum and what they are calling a “multi-candidate” presidential election and “Egypt’s democracy-building exercise”, despite thousands murdered or imprisoned by the military and the return of a repressive police state.

Sisi’s strategy faces several challenges: it is reminiscent of the post-January 25 revolution, meaning it is ultimately doomed. Second, Sisi lacks a clear vision, making him hostage to a number of forces that could use him as a scapegoat. Sisi lacks the popular support enjoyed by his predecessors in the Egyptian army even though many of the challenges he currently faces were inherited from the past.

Blurry vision

Sisi’s deliberately soft and paternal tone, simple language and repetition of emotional phrases have meant his speeches reach a wide cross-section of society. However, closer analysis of his speeches reveals glaring contradictions. For example, he often uses the phrase, “Do you not know you are the coolness of our eyes?” when addressing the public. However, he has yet to utter a single word of condolence regarding Egyptian loss of life since he came to power even though he has repeatedly expressed regret over police and military personnel killed.

In another example, Sisi has stated, “Tomorrow you will see that Egypt will encompass the whole world”, only to follow with an announcement shortly thereafter that he does not carry a magic wand and that the Egyptian people will have to sacrifice for a generation or two to allow his rule to bear fruits.

Even more dangerous than contradictory speeches has been Sisi's inability to palpably address Egypt's security, economic and social challenges. While Sisi has requested a mandate from the people to eliminate violence and terrorism, thousands have been killed during his nine-month de facto rule. Sisi's lack of a clear vision and strategy to address this creates the very real threat of a bloody civil conflict, with bombings targeting state institutions and the absence of any state control in certain regions such as Sinai, where an army helicopter was shot down in January 2014.

Popularity lacking a solid base

There is a general impression that Sisi enjoys a large cross-societal following; however, this support is based largely on the 30 June Coalition, full of its own contradictions. The coalition includes middle class and simple non-politicised lower classes side-lined by the January 2011 revolution. Other Sisi supporters include some state institutions, Mubarak regime remnants and businessmen who largely benefited from his rule. Furthermore, their support stems not from loyalty to Sisi but rather from a desire to avoid accountability for their links to state institutions which protected their interests. This alliance, however, has already started to crumble and Sisi cannot rely on this alliance to keep him afloat. Former interim vice president Mohamed El-Baradei, for example, resigned after the Rabia and Al-Nahda massacres and the Tamarrod party's youth members continue to experience splits and disagreements.

With this uncertain base of support, Sisi needs a new socio-political base – one not comprised of remnants of the Mubarak regime or the Islamists. His options are not particularly clear but could contain the following scenarios:

Option 1: Sisi forms his own party – a vanguard party composed of youth, providing him with a solid base of support and allowing him to inject new life into state apparatuses. The drawback is that this option needs time – creating a new party requires social capital and grassroots work. State institutions are also incapable of forming a strong state party. Finally, most authoritarian-based parties are doomed to fail.

Option 2: Sisi creates a "Nasserite trend" by democratic representation of the poor. This option is also problematic because Sisi is not Gamal Abdel Nasser and does not possess a clear vision or tangible regime structure.

Option 3: Sisi relies on acceptable figures from the National Party. In fact, this could explain Amr Moussa's role and the re-emergence of old regime figures such as Fathi Sorour and Mufid Shehab after the coup, especially during the creation of the constitution. The challenge for this option is that there is very little general support for

the return of the National Party in addition to the loss of any figures capable of uniting the people behind Sisi.

None of these options are the clear choice – and Sisi has no clear vision of democracy and pluralism, otherwise he could have collaborated with liberal groups which welcomed the military coup and supported him in his eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, he has preferred elements of the old state to these groups, particularly because he feels elements of the old state will be more beneficial to him given their experience with elections during the Mubarak regime.

Sisi's challenges

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, Sisi must address state, security and stability, economic and military relations challenges. This section of the paper analyses these challenges given Egypt's past and current realities.

"State's hinges have loosened"

In one of his speeches, Sisi declared that the "state's hinges have loosened" – the comment was interpreted to mean that Egypt has reached a state of exhaustion. There is administrative backlog, rampant corruption and bribery, and an inability to provide fundamental services to citizens, including education, healthcare and public services.

Power in Egypt has historically been centralised. The 1950s military rule transformed it from a state serving its citizens to a bureaucratic apparatus which solely serves the regime rather than the country. Thus, the state gradually assimilated with the regime and its ruler, becoming the guardian of a small group's interests (the military establishment, businessmen or both). While the judiciary had historically maintained some independence from the regime and executive branch, it has recently become an extension of the regime. Extreme measures had typically been pursued in military courts; however, civil courts are now harsher than their military counterparts.

While Sisi is a candidate from within the state, his relationship with it will not be easy because he wants it to function within a military government framework, something he sees as a nationalist project. While Sisi claims to want to build and reform the country, the ulterior motive has been to pursue the reforms that will serve his own agenda. The state is wary of Sisi's agenda because his reforms may contradict the state's interests. More likely than not, the deep state will try to absorb him and force him to make some concessions. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Interior will try to involve Sisi and the army in its affairs so as to avoid a repeat of the military council's abandonment of the Ministry and demands that Adly and his aides be put on trial after the January 2011 revolution.

To address this challenge, Sisi will continue to attempt to militarize the state apparatus. This is a phenomenon that has intensified since the revolution and during the first transitional phase overseen by the military council. However, it is important to note this will decrease Sisi's ability to manoeuvre and limit his long-term options.

Security and Stability

Sisi supporters seek stability even if it means the return of the police state, repression and autocracy. However, Sisi's strategy thus far has not curbed the demonstrations which started in July 2013 and continue to this day. According to a Washington Post poll, the Muslim Brotherhood does not make up more than 20 per cent of the demonstrating masses. Many of the protests have been led by university students, in addition to labourers which continue to lead strikes dating back to January 2011. Egypt's labourers quickly pulled their support from Sisi and the country has witnessed 1,400 labourer-led protests in the past three months alone.

Economy

The coup's downfall may come from the post-coup government's inability to develop a coherent economic policy, exacerbated by a lack of tourism due to poor security in Egypt. Further exacerbating this challenge is the country's reliance on Gulf countries for funding – funding that will not be able to solve Egypt's chronic structural economic problem. Finally, Sisi does not have a clear economic vision, limiting economic opportunities to local or regional private parties, including large contracts awarded to the Egyptian army and Gulf-based companies.

It is clear that Sisi's economic agenda is far-removed from the poor, but this is problematic given that the Egyptian people's demands cannot wait. Continued support for Sisi relies on his ability to meet people's needs and make improvements to the economic status quo.

Sisi and the military establishment

An amendment included in the 2014 constitution makes the military stronger than the president, and this could be one of the reasons explaining Sisi's reluctance to assume the presidential post as well as his appointment of a relative to the Chief of Staff post. His inability to solve problems has forced the military to retreat from direct support for him, particularly because the army would like to avoid a repeat of the Mubarak era – Sisi's failure could reduce the chances of military control of the country as well as harm the army's image. If Sisi is unable to address problems and the military fears its credibility will sink even lower, Sisi's demise will be as fast and as surprising as his sudden emergence.

Taming polarisation

This paper has examined Sisi's faltering authority in the context of Egypt's increasing polarisation as well as security, economy and military challenges facing the country. Sisi has thus far pursued a strategy of indiscriminate repression and exclusionary policies, widening the coalition of those who oppose his authority as well as losing him necessary political capital from those who helped him overthrow Morsi in the first place. Polarisation continues to increase and will likely be a factor if Sisi fails in his bid to lead the country, particularly as youth, students and labourers continue to oppose his increasingly repressive tactics against the opposition.

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