

Position Paper

Sisi as President: Questionable Legitimacy, Unclear Future

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Military rule returns to Egypt [Associated Press]

Abstract

On 8 June 2014, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's former Minister of Defence, was sworn in before the Supreme Constitutional Court as President of the Egyptian Republic. On 3 July 2013, Marshal Sisi, a general at the time, led the Egyptian army to overthrow President Mohamed Morsi after only one year in office. The lavish formalities of the inauguration swept through some circles with euphoria. For others, it only intensified feelings of calamity dating back to the 30 June 2013 demonstrations, when the military command overthrew the first popularly-elected civilian president in the history of Egypt. It is important to note that the current euphoria of victory is not related to Sisi winning the majority in the recent Egyptian presidential election because his victory was clear even before the election. Rather, it is a function of the Egyptian deep state's victory against the challenges and risks that have threatened it since the overthrow of the Mubarak regime on 11 February 2011.

Introduction

On 3 July 2013, Marshal Sisi, a general at that time, led the army to overthrow President Mohamed Morsi after only one year in office. On 8 June 2014, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, former Egyptian Minister of Defence, was sworn in before the Supreme Constitutional Court as President of the Egyptian Republic. In this context, there is no longer any meaningful debate about whether the overthrow of Morsi was a revolution or a coup, or whether what happened on 3 July 2013 was an extension of the January 2011 revolution or a revolt against it.

The day Sisi took office was not just a formal procedure but rather included a series of ceremonies meetings which continued throughout the day, beginning with a swearing-in ceremony in the Constitutional Court's main hall in the presence of the court's judges, the judiciary, Al-Azhar and the Egyptian church. This was followed by a session at Al-Ittehadia Palace, witnessed by the monarchs and officials of Arab states and other foreign delegations. Foremost among these were the King of Bahrain, the Emir of Kuwait, the Saudi Crown Prince, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and the Palestinian president. In the evening, a festive meeting was hosted in the courtyard of Al-Quba Palace, with the guest list including senior officers of the armed forces, state officials, journalists, writers, artists and public figures. In a new ceremony previously unknown in Egyptian constitutional traditions, the interim president Adli Mansour, and the new president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, signed a document handing over power to the latter.

Sisi's inauguration took place in a festive atmosphere unprecedented in Egyptian tradition, one dominated by luxury and power meant to highlight the prestige and durability of the state. The programme included artillery fire to welcome the new president, Air Force planes flying in the skies above the capital Cairo, and guards lined up in the courtyard of the presidential palace. In Egyptian tradition, the inauguration of presidents has never previously included such ceremonies, not for Morsi nor for any other president before him. Despite differences in the inauguration ceremonies of each president, the event has always been considered a primarily Egyptian affair, one not dependent on the attendance of so many foreign and Arab monarchs and heads of state. While Morsi delivered his most important speech in Tahrir Square, average Egyptian people were completely absent from Sisi's inauguration ceremony.

This paper discusses the new course of events in Egypt and the stark contrast of this lavish inauguration ceremony with the country's persistent economic crisis. There is a large disconnect between the reality of the average Egyptian and the luxurious ceremony that occurred in the presence of other tyrants. With so many challenges facing the country, it remains unclear which path will Sisi choose to deal with the predicaments burdening the state and its people, both politically and economically.

Legitimacy crisis and the return of the State

As previously mentioned, the lavish formalities of the dazzling inauguration ceremony masked a feeling of calamity in some quarters. The feelings of calamity date back to the demonstrations of 30 June 2013, when the military command overthrew the first popularly-elected civilian president in the history of Egypt. On the other hand, the euphoria of victory experienced by other camps is not related to Sisi winning the majority in the recent presidential election, but rather their view that this is a victory for

the Egyptian deep state against the challenges and risks that have threatened it ever since the overthrow of the Mubarak regime on 11 February 2011.

Over the past eleven months, Sisi and his supporters have continually reiterated that events in Egypt between 30 June and 3 July 2013 were a popular revolution, and have framed the army's role as a response to the demands of the people. However, the coup's ghost continues to dominate the political consciousness, tainting Sisi and his supporters' images. The relentless and continuous popular demonstrations and the estrangement of political entities and figures other than the 3 July regime have reinforced the loss of legitimacy. To counter this legitimacy deficit, media outlets, writers and journalists loyal to the Minister of Defence have attempted to manufacture a popular portrait of Sisi that depicts him as enjoying widespread support among the Egyptian people. Even his candidacy for the presidency was portrayed as a response to popular pressure.

Sisi himself seemed convinced of his popularity, and his self-confidence was so great that he did not bother to provide an election platform during the recent election campaign. He did hold public meetings, but used them to declare his desire to see thirty million Egyptians going to the polls. Because Sisi's victory in the elections was never in doubt, the proportion of voter turnout became the most prominent measure of legitimacy for the presidential elections.

The surprise was that Egyptians were reluctant to vote on the two days assigned by the Supreme Commission for Elections, 26 and 27 May 2014. The presence of a large number of foreign journalists and observers made it difficult to hide the fact that the majority of Egyptians did not vote. A relentless media campaign was launched to push people to vote, using begging and even threatening to push citizens to the polls. The High Elections Commission was implicitly and explicitly put under pressure to extend the voting period for a third day, but the third day of polling was even worse than the first two, with polling stations almost totally devoid of voters.

Thus, the regime's legitimacy crisis was exacerbated by the presidential election sham, and it became necessary for the inauguration ceremony to include regional and international elements in an elaborate celebration. Further, the formal handover of power between Mansour and El-Sisi was introduced as a mechanism to confirm the new president's legitimacy and the path that brought him to the presidency.

The inauguration ceremony was not without a feeling of victory and dominance on the state's part. This was reflected not only in the lavish procedures and rituals and the palatial halls and courtyards, but also in the letters of the Vice Presidents of the Constitutional Court, the speech delivered by Adli Mansour, and the evening speech by Sisi, where he used phrases such as, "(The) Egyptian state has proved that it is resistant

to fracture", and "preserving the unity of the state", and "restoring the prestige of the state".

Indeed, it is important to make the distinction that throughout the past three years there has been no group seeking to break up the Egyptian state. Even on the eve of Mubarak's ouster, the rebels spoke proudly about their revolution's successful toppling of the regime without having to dismantle the state. Most Egyptians support the introduction of a gradual process to reform the state, its institutions and its relationship with citizens, and this was reflected in the policy pursued by Morsi. Even this gradual reform approach was met with a great deal of fear and apprehension by elements of the Egyptian state, one which had expanded and flourished for over two hundred years without interruption. So, when the plan to rid the country of Morsi and the 25 January revolution began to take shape, almost all deep state institutions sided with it.

With the arrival of Sisi, the offspring of the military arm of the state, to the presidency, the Egyptian state declared victory over the danger that had threatened it throughout the preceding three years. From the standpoint of the Egyptian state, Sisi's presidency means a return to the status quo, with entrenched state traditions for dealing with citizens and a network of relationships and interests that support the state.

Challenges facing Sisi's presidency

It was no secret during the past eleven months that the Defence Minister and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces were the real managers of the country's affairs, and that Adli Mansour was just a constitutional interface. This ambiguous power situation allowed Marshal El-Sisi and his comrades to deny responsibility for policies and decisions that did not garner public acceptance, instead placing responsibility for failure on the shoulders of the government and the interim president. After the 8 June 2014 elections, this is no longer possible. Sisi is now formally in charge of governance and the state, and he must currently face several of the worst crises experienced by Egypt in its modern history: the crisis of political and social divisions, the continuing deterioration of the economy and the dilemma of state structural reform.

Political and social divisions

There is raging political crisis in Egypt. The reluctance of voters to participate in the presidential election revealed the depth and intensity of popular frustration, and in the absence of reliable polls, the scale of support for Sisi and the size of the opposition to his reign are both unclear. Sisi's major problem, of course, is that most of the forces and political figures that supported the events of 30 June 2013 and opposed President Morsi had actually believed that the army was going to support them to build a new democracy. When this group saw that their country had gone back to paramilitary rule,

most of them quickly distanced themselves from the new regime. This means that the 3 July 2013 or Sisi regime, as it should now be called, lost a lot of supporters and did not win any new ones during the past year.

The divided polity is reflected in the continued and unabated demonstrations since the 3 July 2013 coup, with Sisi responding with large-scale arrest campaigns. The relationship between the security apparatus and police on the one hand, and the general public on the other, has evolved into something even worse than it was during Hosni Mubarak's rule. More than 20,000 detainees and prisoners have been held on the grounds of purely political opposition activities. Many Egyptians have lost confidence in the judicial system, particularly since it has become a tool of further repression in the hands of the regime. Despite the fact that the armed opposition remains limited in scope, the Sinai Peninsula has become an insecure area due to the activities of armed groups, and reports indicate that the country has become a repository for weapons and explosives flowing from the neighbouring African countries.

To put it succinctly, the politically divided atmosphere has dramatically impacted social cohesion, the education system, the global credibility of the regime and its relations with international and regional organisations.

Deteriorating economic situation

Just a few days before Sisi's presidential inauguration, the government of interim Prime Minister Mahlab announced that it had borrowed sixty-six billion pounds from the local market in May as part of an ongoing process of borrowing to fill the budget deficit. In one forecast, the government raised the deficit from 156 to 198 billion pounds at the end of the fiscal year (which coincides with the end of June 2014). The Egyptian Ministry of Finance announced that the size of the public debt reached 1.5 trillion pounds at the end of 2013, and is expected to exceed two trillion pounds at the beginning of 2015, which will be an unprecedented burden in the history of modern Egypt. It is clear that the financial aid and investments by the three Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait) after the overthrow of President Morsi, estimated at twenty billion dollars, were not sufficient to address the financial and economic imbalances in the country.

The Egyptian government's main error is that it doesn't seek any solutions outside of continuous borrowing. Coup leaders believed Gulf aid would create an atmosphere of optimism and restore the economic situation, but this did not materialise. Egyptian investors from among senior business supporters of the coup have not fulfilled their promises to pump large investments into the market. Furthermore, the tense security situation and political concerns have not helped to overcome fears of foreign investors,

exacerbated by the ever-increasing pace of labour strikes which have abated in the least.

The government also failed in its efforts to revitalise the tourism sector, which has always been one of the most important sources of government revenue. It was unable to stop the continuing devaluation of the Egyptian pound; consequently, state revenues from taxes and customs fees were well below expectations. While Sisi's government chair Mahlab plans on the gradual lifting of fuel, electricity and basic commodities subsidies (which consume nearly a quarter of the state budget), the potential impact of such a policy on social reconciliation is unclear because it is likely to anger a large sector of Egyptians.

On the eve of Sisi's win, the Saudi monarch, recognising the size of the economic and financial burden facing his allies in Cairo, called for an international donors' conference to help Egypt out of its financial and economic crisis. However, past experience dictates that prior donor conferences to help the Arab Spring countries were not particularly successful, and it is likely that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait will shoulder the greatest burden in attempting to save the Sisi regime from financial and economic collapse. Perhaps more importantly, the extent of their willingness to assist Egypt once again is unknown, especially given a continued global economic downturn.

Like most similar cases, the economic crisis places the heaviest burden on the poor and low-income earners. In Egypt, these categories represent the largest segment of Egyptians. Sisi's government will find itself in trouble if it tries to tackle the crisis by increasing the poor and low income earners' burdens and withdrawing government subsidies for fuel and basic commodities. However, its dilemma will be equally complex if it casts the burden on the business sector and the wealthy, strong supporters of the regime.

Structural reform of the state

The question of reforming the state is no less complex. The new president is aware that maintaining the judiciary, the security apparatus and interior ministry, and the education, health, and other ministries as they are will not help economic revitalisation, nor will it assist him to gain much-needed popular support. But Sisi is also well-aware that Morsi's overthrow would not have been possible without the support of these state institutions and agencies. If Sisi chooses to clash with state agencies, their position would be similar to the position taken against Morsi, but if he ignores the urgent need for structural reform of the state, he will be unable to fulfil any promises he made to the public regarding economic and social agendas.

Feasibility of the security solution

Despite the ostentatious inauguration ceremonies and the detailed attention to protocol and high-level foreign representation, all aimed at confirming the legitimacy of the new president and his regime, officials at Al-Ittehadia Palace failed to secure significant representation from the United States and the major European countries. Western countries were not absent from the ceremony, but they sent second-level staff, perhaps a signal of their disagreement with Sisi's policies, or a lack of confidence in his regime's viability, or both. The US, as well as Britain, France and Germany, realise the enormity of the challenges facing Egypt, and are aware that the 3 July 2013 coup has exacerbated these challenges rather than addressing them. Certainly, these countries do not desire Morsi's return to power, but they also want a process that addresses political polarisation and creates a more stable political system while still maintaining an alliance with the US and other western powers. Sisi has thus far chosen a policy that exacerbates polarisation and exclusion, and Egypt has become far less stable as a result.

It's likely that Washington and other Western capitals have conveyed their vision on how to heal the deep political rifts to Sisi, likely emphasising that political action should precede security and economic action. However, the new president seems to want to continue betting on achieving political and security stability without making any concessions to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic forces allied with them. Despite the size and breadth of the popular protest movement, and the loss of most of his earlier allies, there is no evidence that Sisi realises the broad spectrum of the opposition that he faces, and that the Brotherhood are but one component of this opposition.

Many have noted that Sisi's speech on the eve of his inauguration repeatedly used the phrase 'national reconciliation', but this reference to 'reconciliation' was not given any clear context. Given the approach chosen to manage the crisis since last year, and the few interviews conducted during the election campaign, it is difficult to imagine a drastic step in this direction. In addition, Sisi's allies in and outside state entities would not, at this early stage, support any conciliatory move in the direction of Islamic forces, since this would certainly mean sacrificing a number of coup "heroes".

Based on his confidence and trust in the promises of support from the Gulf, Sisi will most likely try to deal with the economic, financial and social crises without making any fundamental change in his highly securitised and exclusionary approach to political affairs, perhaps until the end of the year. If he succeeds in his attempt, the political situation in the country will continue as it is; however, if he fails, he will be forced to seek a different political approach, such as reconciliation with his political opponents, or else face the risk of yet another popular uprising.