

COMMENTARY

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Taking Egypt Back to the First Republic

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Defence Minister General Abdul-Fattah Sisi, who was elevated to the supreme military rank of Field Marshal on February 1, 2014, will almost certainly become Egypt's next president in the election scheduled to take place within the coming two months. His swift rise from obscurity as head of military intelligence a mere eighteen months ago and his charismatic, direct appeals to the Egyptian public since overthrowing President Mohammad Morsi on 3 July 2013, have prompted many to liken him to Egypt's first president, Gamal Abdul-Nasser. Nasser, then a lieutenant-colonel, played a central role in the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy and establishment of Egypt's first republic in 1952, before becoming president by referendum in 1956.

Sisi's confirmation as a national icon in the Nasser mould seems assured. With the official nomination of the army behind him and several potential candidates already announcing they will not run against him, Sisi will similarly become president by what amounts to acclamation, rather than a genuinely contested election. While Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi recently likened Sisi to a modern-day De Gaulle or Eisenhower – generals who went on to become memorable presidents of France and the United States - former foreign minister and one-time presidential candidate Amr Musa proclaimed that Sisi's presidency would “pave the road for a civil state based on rights and freedoms.”

Musa, who spoke without any apparent irony, also alluded to the historical parallel with the Nasser era by adding that “the third republic in Egypt will start” under Sisi. Egypt has never even made it to the second republic. The post- Mubarak transition was aborted by the weakness and divisions of the parties that contested the political field after February 2011, the inept

management of the next fifteen months of the transition by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the inability of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership and Morsi in the following year to grasp that nascent democracy required building genuine consensus, and the final military intervention of July 2013.

Rather than proceed on to the third republic, Egypt is moving in the opposite direction, back towards the first. The populist rhetoric is there. In its statement of 27 January 2014, nominating Sisi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces described this as a mandate requested by the “masses.” The choice of the term “masses” signals a turn away from the powerful slogan of the 25 January uprising: “the people want....” Rather than reaffirm the notion of the sovereign will of the people, which is at the heart of democracy, the army has replaced it with the loose, inchoate term “masses” much loved by demagogic autocrats.

This is a clear throwback to the Nasser era, but harks back just as much to the “jamahiriyyah” (state of the masses) declared in 1977 by Libyan leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi. In both cases a charismatic leader claimed a special, direct bond with the people that enabled him to utilize state institutions to cement his personal power and eliminate autonomous societal actors that posed a potential political challenge. But the result was to weaken political life and civil society without enhancing the state’s administrative or economic performance.

Sisi claims a similar bond with the people, but is already stuck in a political dead end. His primary social constituency – and only political vehicle – is the coalition of state institutions that backed his takeover in July: the army, interior ministry, judiciary, and upper swathes of the civil service. Nasser sought repeatedly to complement his reliance on state institutions by creating a viable political instrument for mass mobilization, but every effort failed: first the Liberation Rally, then the National Union, and finally the Arab Socialist Union.

Sisi will fare no better. He put together a patchwork of political partners that enabled the formation of the Beblawi cabinet in mid-July 2013, but this coalition remains as ill-fitting as the Revolution Command Council set up by the Free Officers to govern Egypt after taking power in 1952. The council, which combined free-market liberals, Muslim Brothers, and communists, lost one key component after another until being decisively gutted by Nasser in 1954.

The Beblawi cabinet represents a similarly incompatible meeting of political agendas and socioeconomic demands. So far it has papered over the differences by raising wages while announcing new investments and reforms to attract foreign capital, but this has only been possible thanks to the US\$ 12 billion in financial and economic assistance from several Gulf Cooperation Council countries. They have promised additional aid, but will not continue propping up Egypt’s budget and trade deficits indefinitely.

Egypt was in the same position in the mid-1970s, when then-President Anwar Sadat sought Gulf aid to maintain a bloated state apparatus, army, and state-owned economic enterprises. Sadat eventually turned to the United States – using the Camp David Accords with Israel as a lever to secure a permanent flow of U.S. assistance – but the U.S. does not provide direct budgetary assistance or subsidies and its actual aid now represents a very small portion of Egypt’s GDP. Sisi has no new sources of major funding to which he can turn when unconditional Gulf aid inevitably slows or ceases.

Nor does Sisi have the options that were available to Nasser, whose sudden, unplanned lurches into radically new economic policies were driven by the search for capital: land reform after 1952, Egyptianization in the late 1950s, and socialist nationalization in 1961, backed by major Soviet assistance. But these injections of capital could not prevent Egypt from reaching a critical financial crisis in 1965.

Egypt’s deep structural problems continue today: the post-2000 boom of Mubarak’s last decade in power was accelerated by real estate speculation and construction and was not accompanied by equal increases in productivity or efficiency. In its latest report on Egyptian economic prospects, the Institute of International Finance described the longer-term outlook as “cloudy with major risks to the downside.” The Beblawi cabinet – or any future government – is committed to pursuing and deepening a neo-liberal economic agenda in response, but this sits ill with the interests and expectations of the state institutions that make up Sisi’s primary constituency.

Yet sweeping reform of the massive state administration and state-owned companies is necessary, along with democratization of the entire structure of local government. This is not only in order to ensure the external support and foreign investment that lie at the heart of neo-liberal policy prescriptions, but also to reduce the dead weight of Egypt’s authoritarian bureaucratic legacy on political and economic life.

It does not help that neither Sisi nor the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces possess an economic vision for the country, unlike the Turkish Army, on which they consciously model their claim to a manifest right and duty to steer Egypt politically and administratively. As importantly, following its 1980 coup d’état, the Turkish Army planned actively to return power to democratically elected civilian parties, which it put into effect in 1983. In contrast, Sisi is making himself president. By making the Egyptian Armed Forces the chief kingmaker in the coalition of state institutions that now governs Egypt; he has trapped the army in a commitment to uphold his presidency, linking its fortunes to seemingly intractable problems for which he offers no genuine solutions.

Under these conditions, Egypt will experience prolonged political and societal polarization. Worse, it is suffering a marked erosion of constitutional legitimacy: it has had three constitutions

in as many years, and several constitutional declarations, but none have resolved its need for full transition from authoritarian rule to genuinely democratic politics. Despite its strong state legacy, Egypt appears to be joining the group of Arab countries – including Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Palestine – that have lost the minimum societal consensus on a constitutional framework that provides the predictable mechanisms and procedures necessary for the conduct of peaceful politics.

Whatever his opponents say, Sisi probably did not intend to become president from the outset. Rather, he seems to have planned initially to position himself as the supreme power broker behind the presidency and to secure the army's interests in perpetuity. But at every stage he has taken steps that narrowed down his range of options in the next stage, and now he cannot retreat. Sisi has shown an ability to imitate the trappings of Nasser's power and is clearly a careful tactician. He is weaker as a political strategist, unable to map out and anticipate the points of convergence at which the country's social, economic, and institutional dynamics will force his hand.

Sisi will almost certainly see out his term – unlike the man he deposed, Morsi – but at the cost of taking Egypt back to the first republic.

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