

Egypt: Sisi and the Permanent Coup

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The Egyptian Parliament is expected to adopt earlier this week a constitutional reform that will eradicate the latest achievements of the 2011 revolution and allow Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to remain in power until. . . 2030.

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Throughout the six years that marked President Abdelfatah al-Sisi's coup on Egypt's first civilian president, Sisi orchestrated several political, security, legislative, constitutional, and electoral coups. Sisi is currently preparing a constitutional coup that allows him to remain in office until 2034. However, by doing so, he committed a tragic mistake. Not only is he granting the military a constitutional cover to remove him, but also gave all those who oppose him within and outside his regime a goal that bridges their irreconcilable divisions. Sisi might be a victim of his own making, the experiences of former Egyptian presidents who amended the constitution to consolidate their powers ended up with them losing it.

Although Sisi announced after his coup in 2013 that he won't run for the presidency, he has been effectively ruling the country since then. Within a year, Sisi broke his promise and announced he's running for the presidency and turned against his secular allies, eliminating them from government and imprisoning their activists. During his first four-year term and behind the smokescreen of fighting terrorism, Egypt witnessed the largest crackdown in its modern history against peaceful opposition, whether Islamist or secular.

Throughout his first year as president, Sisi led a legislative coup through issuing hundreds of legislations, many of which unconstitutional. The parliament, which according to a now-imprisoned former advisor to Sisi, was engineered by intelligence services [1], and rubberstamped those legislations en-masse during its first sessions. By the end of his first term, Sisi started settling scores with senior military and security officers. He fired the military's chief-of-staff and the director of General Intelligence and put them under house arrest and appointed his office's chief-of-staff and his son, Mahmoud, at the top two positions in General Intelligence. Sisi imprisoned presidential candidates running against him in reelection or put them under house arrest (a precedent throughout the republic's 65 years) including a former military chief-of-staff and a former prime minister.

FAILURE OF THE ANTI-TERRORIST WAR IN SINAI

After Sisi ran the elections effectively unopposed, he led the largest campaign of mass arrests of secular political figures since 1981 and sacked the minister of defense whose loyalty to him was questioned, and appointed instead the head of the presidential guard. In tandem with the crackdown

on the former generals, he ordered the military to launch the propagandized “Comprehensive Campaign” against ISIS in Sinai, which was perceived by many as a distraction from the scandalous elections. The campaign, which was meant to last for three months, dragged on for a year and ended unceremoniously when the military spokesperson simply ceased to refer to it in his statements. ISIS still carries out devastating attacks and utilizes the military’s crimes against civilians in Sinai as a propaganda tool.

Academic studies note [2] that the constant decisive factor in Egyptian politics since the military’s first coup in 1952 has been contention between the military and senior military officers in power. They also observe that this vicious contention has consumed the country [3] and led to the depletion of its resources and the erosion of competencies [4]. This contention has also reflected severely on the professionalism and effectiveness of the military and contributed to Egypt’s most humiliating military defeat in 1967. During a general’s first day as president he realizes that he daily has to deal with a very delicate balance between two vital, yet contradictory, considerations. The first is that the military is his primary constituency, and the second is that military is a threat and that he has to contain senior military officers’ ambitions to replace him. The dilemma of Sisi, and all presidents that preceded him throughout the past 67 years is how to manage such a delicate balance without ending up being crushed by popular uprisings or military coups.

FULL AUTHORITY OVER THE JUDICIARY

The constitutional amendment that allows Sisi to stay in power for extra 12 years, has overshadowed other amendments that reassert the one-man dictatorship. According to statements by two senior judicial officials, those amendments will give Sisi complete authority over the judiciary and constitutionalize the military’s dominance of politics. Those unprecedented statements, along with other public positions of figures from the Mubarak and Sisi regimes, point to a lack of consensus inside the regime on those amendments. The wording of the amendment concerning the role of the military also implies that for the first time its role is no longer limited to a security agency, but a guaranteed position as an arbitrator between major political actors, including the president. The military has already played this role in 2011 and 2013 when it overthrew two presidents, despite the absence of such a stipulation in the constitution. Such an amendment is a double-edged sword: it gives the army a justification to turn Egypt into a bloodbath as was the case in Syria, but also gives it a constitutional cover to overthrow Sisi with the next major crisis.

MAINTAINING IMPUNITY

Sisi is likely aware of the dangers the constitutional amendments carry for his future as president. However, he is also fully aware that if he steps aside in 2022 as the constitution currently stipulates, he will not be safe. Reports by national and international rights groups accuse him of committing crimes that far exceed those of Mubarak, including overseeing the worst massacre in Egypt’s modern history. Staying in power is the only guarantee to maintain his impunity, even if it’s at the expense of disturbing the delicate balance he tries to maintain with the military.

Mohammed Morsi went down in history as the president who inadvertently proved to Egyptians that Islam is not a solution to politics [5]. In all likelihood, Sisi will go down in history as the general who proved to Egyptians that the military isn’t a solution to Egypt’s chronic political dilemma, but an entity that should indefinitely stay out of it.

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P.S.

- ORIENT XXI, 15 APRIL 2019:
<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/egypt-the-permanent-coup,3030>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://madamasr.com/en/2016/03/14/feature/politics/anatomy-of-an-election/>
- [2] <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190239206.001.0001/acprof-9780190239206>
- [3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2018-02-13/egypt>
- [4] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/31/the-u-s-has-wasted-billions-of-dollars-on-failed-arab-armies/>
- [5] <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/3130.aspx>