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The Election of Abd al-Fatah el-Sisi as President of Egypt

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There were no surprises in last week's presidential election in Egypt. It was clear from the outset that Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi, the former defense minister and the most powerful man in the Egyptian leadership, would be elected Egypt's next president. His rivals made life easy for him. Sisi's primary enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood, largely boycotted the election, thereby paving the way for his landslide victory, and the low voter turnout will probably soon be forgotten. Moreover, only a single candidate – Hamadin Sabahi – opposed him. In 2012, in the previous presidential election, Sabahi placed third among 13 candidates, earning five million votes. Sabahi, a well known figure in Egypt, was a student leader in the 1970s, a leftist Nasserite activist arrested several times, and a prominent member of parliament for a decade. He was a leader of the January 2011 revolution that toppled Mubarak's regime; he opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, and was regarded as someone who represented the values of the revolution.

However, it was clear that Sabahi could not compete with Sisi's status and popularity. Sisi has been the most prominent member of the military leadership that has ruled Egypt since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood regime under Mohamed Morsi in the middle of 2013. The bitter disappointment, anger, and frustration of most of the Egyptian public with the Muslim Brotherhood regime strengthened the sense that Egypt needs a strong leader who can restore stability to Egypt, fight domestic terrorism, enforce law and order, ensure personal security, rebuild the failing economy, which has declined since Mubarak's fall from power, and strengthen the country's damaged regional status. Most of the Egyptian public, political parties, and media view Sisi as such a leader; the fact that he enjoys the full backing of other senior military figures is a significant bonus. Some have gone so far as to cast him in the role of a second Nasser, though he is still far from having attained the stature of the Egyptian and Arab world leader of the 1950s and 1960s. But the fact that the comparison is being made is instructive: many Egyptians long for a strong leader who will take Egypt in a new direction.

However, not everyone in Egypt wants to see Sisi as the nation's leader. First and foremost, the Muslim Brotherhood considers him as an enemy for having deposed Morsi, who was freely elected by a majority of the population, and has consequently declared war on the organization. Yet even among groups that opposed the Muslim Brotherhood – including liberal factions – there are those who worry that Sisi will distance himself from the goals of

the revolution, stop the democratization process that began after the revolution, return Egypt to the Mubarak era, and take advantage of his standing to construct a military dictatorship. At the same time the damage incurred by the Brotherhood has resulted in the need to stabilize the nation and rebuild it, and this is seen by many Egyptians as the priority, overshadowing the drive to promote the revolutionary values and the democratic process.

Sisi will continue to face two difficult, interconnected challenges that he had already begun to tackle. The first is rebuilding the economy. Egypt suffers from an inherently weak economy, a situation that was exacerbated by the 2011 revolution, as the ensuing instability directly affected foreign investments and tourism. Sisi will have to find ways to attract foreign investors, reduce unemployment, especially among younger people, bring tourists back to the country, and develop infrastructures and industry. This is a difficult task that will not be swiftly accomplished. Sisi has presented an economic program and spoken of improvements within two years. But since 2011, another element has entered the political game: if Sisi fails to show the start of real change for the better within a short period of time, the masses are liable to take to the streets to demand his ouster for having raised their expectations of a brighter economy. The fall of Mubarak is instructive: the army's support for the regime no longer guarantees the regime's immunity.

The second challenge Sisi faces concerns the Muslim Brotherhood, the increased level of terrorism, and the need to restore law and order. The Muslim Brotherhood has been ousted from the government, it has been declared an illegal terrorist organization, and hundreds of activists have been killed in clashes with security forces. Many of its leaders have been arrested and brought to trial; some have been condemned to death (which is not to say that they will necessarily be executed). In media interviews, Sisi has made it clear that he means to deal with radical Islam as represented by the Brotherhood and other Islamic movements with a heavy hand. He has stressed that because of their radical stance he has no intention of allowing the Brotherhood or similar organizations and their attendant terrorist organizations to exist, and that the constitution does not allow for the existence of political parties based on religion.

Given this state of affairs, the Brotherhood must choose its next step. On the one hand, by declaring it an illegal terrorist organization, Sisi has closed the door to the possibility that the Brotherhood can join the government via negotiations as long as it remains a political association. It is also doubtful that the movement would want to be a part of the government, given its sense that it was illegitimately sidelined. On the other hand, the majority of the public also turned its back on the Brotherhood and supports Sisi in his attempt to suppress the movement. If the Brotherhood decides to engage the current regime in a violent struggle, the people are liable to blame it for dragging the country into civil war. Accordingly, the Brotherhood is currently engaged in a limited struggle with the regime, directing its terrorist activities mainly against government targets in Sinai and elsewhere. The problem with this is that it leads nowhere.

Sisi will also have to consider his relations with the international powers. The top leadership in Egypt resents the US administration for failing to provide full backing for the current regime, for claiming it ousted a democratically elected government, and especially for having suspended previously promised shipments of military equipment. This anger impelled Egypt, in most unusual fashion, to hold talks with Russia: in late 2013 and early 2014, Russia's defense minister and foreign minister visited Cairo, and their Egyptian counterparts – including Sisi himself, then the defense minister – paid reciprocal visits to Moscow. There were also reports of a large arms deal in the making, although there has been no official confirmation of such a deal and the reports stopped circulating. Instead it seems the move was primarily designed as a display of Egyptian displeasure with US conduct. Now that Sisi has been democratically elected, the more likely scenario is that no large arms deal between Egypt and Russia will be signed, but that some limited form of military cooperation between them may occur. In any case, the key to all of this is the extent to which the US administration will act to smooth matters over with the Egyptian leadership.

From Israel's perspective Sisi's election is clearly the preferred outcome. His regime is far preferable to the Muslim Brotherhood, with its fundamentally hostile attitude to Israel. Sabahi, Sisi's rival in the election, was also highly critical of Israel and expressed his support for Hamas. By contrast, Sisi portrays the peace agreement with Israel as an Egyptian strategic asset. He does not doubt its necessity and has explicitly stated that he will honor it. Given his past as the head of intelligence and defense minister, Sisi is aware of the advantages of military coordination with Israel, and has expressed his desire to amend the military appendix to the peace agreement together with Israel so as to allow Egypt to strengthen its control of Sinai and its ability to tackle terrorism and arms smuggling in the peninsula. Sisi also views Hamas as a terrorist organization with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and one may assume that he will continue to act to stop arms smuggling from Sinai into the Gaza Strip. Thus, his approach seems to promise more understanding and cooperation with Israel in the field of security. In this sense, Israel acted wisely when it allowed Egypt to station forces in Sinai beyond what was specified in the peace agreement and when it interceded with Washington to reduce friction between the US administration and the Egyptian leadership.

