

320

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THE AMBITIONS OF AL-SISI

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Since destroying the opposition and consolidating his regime, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Egyptian president, has given free rein to the expression of his ambitions, whether domestic or international in character. A few days after presenting a pharaonic project for the construction of a new capital in the middle of the desert at an investors' conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Sisi launched the country into a military campaign led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The Egyptian Rais has proposed the reclaiming of Egypt's role as a regional power, lost over recent decades, which is a gamble for a country that still faces some enormous challenges.

Almost 20 months after the coup d'état, it is safe to say that the period of revolutionary effervescence that began in 2011 has come to an end. In theory, with the new parliament still not formed, the transition process set out in the road map in summer 2013 has yet to be concluded. Nevertheless, the new political order seems now to be fully consolidated. This is due in part to the manifest incapacity of any of the regime's opponents to provoke the fall of the government, but also because its initial political positions have been strengthened, including the suppression of any dissenting voice and the conversion of the anti-terrorist fight into the main legitimating rationale of the political moment.

Led by the army, the various intelligence and security services continue to dominate the political scene of the Arab country and their philosophy guides the government's actions. Executive power is committed to imposing ostensible social consensus by force, rather than negotiation or agreement with the various political actors in the country. In this sense, Sisi's conduct is very similar to that which characterised the rule of the former dictator, Hosni Mubarak.

The reports made by human rights organisations, Egyptian as well as international, leave no doubt about the extent of the repression: torture at the hands of the security forces is systematic – more than 150 people have died in police custody – and the country maintains secret prisons, veritable legal black holes where even minors are locked up. The Muslim Brotherhood has been turned into the public enemy and its leaders continue to accumulate convictions, among them the death penalty. At the moment, there is no sign of détente in the conflict between the historical Islamist organisation and the state, but rather the opposite.

This scenario of stabilisation also applies to the armed actions of the radical Islamist militias. Despite almost daily news reports in the official media of the detention or death of alleged terrorists, above all on the Sinai Peninsula, the state has not been able to eliminate the drip-drip of attacks by the Islamist insurgency. Nevertheless, thus far, these groups have been unable to control what is a substantial strip of territory with any degree of stability, or to assassinate any figure of significance in the government. It is, thus, more of a chronic illness than a mortal danger for the state, and yet terrorism remains at the centre of public debate and is used to justify whatsoever restriction on individual freedoms.

Alongside the repression, the regime is betting its survival on economic development bringing improvements in the living standards of the majority of the population. It is a new version of the old autocratic social pact that insists on obedience in exchange for prosperity: more bread and less freedom. Sisi's development strategy seems to be based on the implementation of mega-projects, such as building a new Suez Canal or a new, modern capital in the desert. These initiatives have been welcomed by public opinion, which is highly docile towards the government, but doubts have been raised among experts. Various independent analysts have warned of the excessive optimism of the predictions on which these proposals are based. More than sustainable development, these mega-projects seem designed to satisfy the president's delusions of grandeur.

The country's international policy is also dominated by renewed ambition. Having spent several years consumed by internal disputes, the government has recently increased the effort given to its outward projection and it is the anti-terrorist fight that unites domestic and international policies. For the first time in decades, the Egyptian army carried out an operation beyond its borders in February. In response to the brutal murder of 21 Egyptian Christians at the hands of Islamic State in Libya, Egypt conducted a number of aerial bombardments of the jihadist group's positions in its neighbouring country.

Taking advantage of this action, Sisi proposed the creation of a pan-Arab intervention force to confront the jihadist threat. Initially ignored, the proposal was revived a few weeks later, following the coup d'état by the Houthi militias in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's strong reaction to it, forming an ad hoc coalition to intervene in its southern neighbour. Cairo enthusiastically joined the anti-Houthi coalition and, at the annual summit of the Arab League, held in Sharm el-Sheikh, led the approval of the creation of a joint military force of the Arab states.

Sisi's ambitions on both domestic and international fronts could be hampered by the restrictions of a climate that is highly unfavourable to adventures. Economically, Egypt finds itself in a delicate position, with a public deficit of more than 10% of GDP, while it is not at all clear that the private sector wishes to invest in mega-projects of doubtful viability. On the military front, the army was already fighting a tough battle with the insurgency in Sinai, and finds itself in a state of alert in the light of the threats posed by the instability in Libya. Therefore, a land intervention in Yemen, which is costly owing to the rough terrain, could outgrow the capacities of the armed forces. In fact, some influential voices in the media have already made their misgivings clear.