



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

A Year of Sisi's Presidency: Deteriorating Conditions, Mounting Opposition

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2015

A Year of Sisi's Presidency: Deteriorating Conditions, Mounting Opposition

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | June 2015

Copyright © 2015 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Disintegration of the July 2 Coup Alliance	1
Government Promises, Popular Disaffection	3
External Pressures, Diminishing Aid	4
The State of the Opposition	5

Introduction

A year after officially seizing the reins of power in Egypt, though effectively having governed the country since the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi on July 3, 2013, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has overseen an unprecedented deterioration in Egypt's security and economic conditions, notwithstanding the massive external financial and political support provided to his junta. In tandem with vanishing hopes for the improved conditions promised by the regime's promotional campaigns, the political-social coalition that supported Sisi's coup began to disintegrate amid rising voices of opposition. This dissent has been interpreted in two ways: as an artificial or "manufactured" opposition designed to give the impression that the regime is attempting to change its approach to security, prevalent since the July 2013 coup; or as a genuine and quickly growing opposition expressing the frustration of broad sectors of social groups and political forces with the failure of the Sisi regime to make good on its political and economic promises.

Disintegration of the July 2 Coup Alliance

Recently, indications have surfaced that there is a real struggle between sections of the regime and influential power centers within it. It appears that a belief has emerged in the military establishment that the army, transformed into a domestic security force, is neither up to wielding governmental authority, nor can it be held accountable for any social disruption that might ensue from the deteriorating political and economic situation, amid fears of an encroachment of chaos from the Sinai into cities west of the Suez Canal. Multiple leaked recordings of General Sisi demonstrate a growing split in the military-security complex, one that is expected to grow in the coming period, with worsening crises that the regime is expected to address.

The Sisi regime's deep-rooted antipathy towards the January 25 uprising's forces necessarily entails the use of Mubarak-era elites, who have their own demands for a share of the regime as expressed by Major General Ahmed Shafiq, thereby provoking concern in military circles over the fate of their monopoly on decision-making.

The political movements that enjoyed the largest popular support base and led the action of June 30, 2013 in support of the July 3rd coup have nearly disappeared from the scene. For example, the Tamarrud (Rebellion) movement, which had been seeking to build on its role in toppling President Morsi by creating a large political party, found itself collapsing from successive splits, and abandoned by the masses. In the period leading up to this, pro-regime media devoted much attention to the movement's crises and divisions, a sign that it was being jettisoned having performed its function of toppling the elected president. On the other hand, civil society and liberal forces began to resume pointed criticisms of the regime, after having been eliminated at an earlier stage from the June 30 coalition, and after a long period of quiescence. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei's comments on his reasons for leaving the political scene shortly after the July 2 coup are a case in point.

Moreover, differences have begun to emerge between the regime and its supporters among those businessmen who played a prominent role in derailing the democratic process, and received compensation from the regime in different ways. Some key businessmen in this grouping have responded sharply to various accusations leveled at them by the regime. On the one hand, because the interests of the regime currently governing Egypt are based upon strengthening the military's industrial-economic and real estate empire, businessmen are needed as project contractors or as the army's junior partners. On the other hand, the regime continues to speak of the vital role of businessmen in the much-vaunted Nahda ("Renaissance") Project. Irrespective of the conflicts, the compromises reached between officers and businessmen with regard to the allocation of economic gains will be at the expense of the poorest strata of society.

Government Promises, Popular Disaffection

One can observe a growing popular discontent, as the government's inability to accomplish its promises to achieve economic stability becomes more apparent. This is amid a continued deterioration of living conditions and high prices, accompanied by phenomena similar to those that deepened the crisis of the Morsi regime in the last months of his rule, such as electricity cuts, queues at gas stations, and so on.

Moreover, there has been mounting and increasingly sarcastic criticism of the economic rescue program the government claimed it was carrying out, in which most of the key projects were promoted as "gigantic", and were therefore allocated to the armed forces on the basis of their capacity for project planning and management. Many experts considered these projects to be characterized by a high cost and feeble economic return, with their implementation depending entirely on the availability of external support.

Furthermore, the slogan of a 'war against terror', long used by the regime as an instrument for confiscating the public space, has ceased to be useful, as harsh repression including the most serious violations of human rights afflicts opposition politicians, activists and jurists far beyond Islamic movement circles. By the same token, inflating the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, often invoked to explain economic setbacks, no longer appears able to cover up weak government performance and frequent disasters stemming from mismanagement and corruption. Criticism of the regime's media has grown in light of broad discontent with the atmosphere of repression of freedoms. Voices have emerged, some of them from within the regime, taking issue with the propaganda strategy, and warning of the limited use of a unified press and controlled media campaigns principally aimed at burnishing Sisi's image. Media repression in the form of interdictions and prohibitions, as well as prosecutions of independent journalists and opposition figures, has generated a great deal of criticism.

This is all accompanied by a growing sense of the ruling authority's inability to foster new political space, with its prevarication in implementing electoral benefits and continued domination of the legislature and the judiciary, where it pushes its own verdicts and suppresses any internal critical voices. In this light, the postponement of parliamentary elections should be interpreted as an indication of the regime's intention to instill the individual ruler with absolute power, and disrupt the landscape of political parties.

External Pressures, Diminishing Aid

The decline of external financial aid, in particular from the Gulf (for a variety of reasons, among them the decline in oil prices), threatens the government's political and economic program. It has become clear that the shrinking external financial support depends upon progress with political measures requested of the Sisi regime. Gulf voices, traditionally supportive of Sisi since his ascension to power, have suggested that there is no confidence in his regime, against a backdrop of leaks attributed to Sisi himself and widely reported in the media, which angered the regime's Gulf allies. This was exacerbated by the ambiguity of Egypt's position regarding the Saudi-Arabia led intervention in Yemen in "Operation Decisive Storm", targeting the forces of former president Ali Abdallah Saleh and the "Ansar Allah" Houthi movement. Some surmise that this dispute is rooted in Saudi Arabia's desire to support local Yemeni political parties with intellectual or organizational ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and to arm them. Related to this are leaks regarding concealed differences between Saudi Arabia and the Sisi regime concerning a host of regional issues stretching from Syria to Libya, relations with Turkey, and freeing Saudi Arabia of being bound by the Egyptian regime's stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood outside of Egypt.

This is all taking place against mounting international criticism of the regime's human rights violations and widespread repression. There is also the diminishing credibility of

Sisi's claim to be a force that can be relied upon in the international war against terrorism, with failures in the Sinai after attacks of the Islamic State (IS) and other armed Islamist groups upon the peninsula's roads, army camps and security headquarters. Successive setbacks in managing the main foreign policy agenda, the most important of which being the Nahda (Renaissance) Dam, also demonstrate how the regime's slack performance undermines Egypt's regional and international standing, and its sources of support.

The State of the Opposition

With the regime's policies failing at various levels, calls are mounting for change, with two hypotheses emerging about the situation. One sees the regime as attempting to present itself in a new light, in response to the internal and external pressures, and to intimate that it will allow the emergence of a real opposition. This is a throw-back to the familiar Egyptian notion of "democratic margin", long used by the Mubarak regime to sweeten tyrannical practices over the three decades of his rule. The second hypothesis sees that a true opposition is developing in the Egyptian political arena, that it is not confined to the Islamists and a portion of the youth of the January Revolution, and that it is increasingly challenging the policies of the regime and its security practices, in an effort to shift the country out of the dead-end created by the military coup. Both hypotheses have been put forward to explain the unprecedented criticisms directed at Sisi and the government. A remarkable degree of interest has been expressed by the Egyptian media in Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei's recent comments and his speech to the European Parliament – including in newspapers and channels until recently considered the most biased in favor of the coalition of forces behind the coup. This has been in contrast to their usual practice of a media blackout of the opposition and its activities. In any case, the regime has begun to feel the pressure exerted upon it from within and from without. It has apparently begun to take action to contain the pressure by

reopening a controlled political arena, introducing new promises, and giving out signals of new directions and different approaches, particularly on the political level. Economically, the regime will seek to secure more Arab and international aid for a country that is a foundation for national stability, and a member of the 'war against terrorism' club. But the mainstay of the regime's continuity will remain linked, above all, to the Egyptian people's yearning for stability after years of turbulence, and, secondly, to the weakness of the opposition forces which have not constituted a real political challenge to the regime and its orientations, or its approaches to Egypt's political, economic and social challenges.