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Abstract

'Respecting the will of Egyptians is nobler than assuming power.' Thus said Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi before assuming power in 2014, referring to his popular mandate to take charge and eliminate 'terrorism'. Our main question in this study is: How did Sisi reconstitute authoritarianism and come to dominate the state and its bureaucracy? Starting with his evocation of the 1967 defeat and his allusion to internal strikes at the Egyptian state that year, we posit several explanations, drawing on other research and the speeches of President Sisi himself. We examine the nature of the 2013 coup and the importance of the 'mandate' for the reconstitution of authoritarianism, as well as the significance of Sisi's discourse and the various elements that aided his rise to power and supported his narrative of events. Finally, we analyse the practical strategy for assuming control of state institutions and subordinating them to his rule and dominance, considering his identification of the military with the state itself.

Introduction

'You're the apple of my eye', Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi told the Egyptian people shortly before assuming power in a popularly supported coup in 2013 against President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the wake of the coup, a process was launched to purge any opposition based on the 'popular mandate' referred to by Sisi in his speeches and 2014 election campaign. The war on terror and the state of unrest were the main props that Sisi and the military relied on to stem the revolutionary tide demanding change to the public order, the structures of the Egyptian state, and the method of governance. As an institution of government, the Egyptian military had never been the target of the kind of criticism and political activism seen in the early years of the revolution, in particular starting in late 2011 with its violent confrontation of revolutionary forces in Egypt's streets and squares. At the same time, the military state that had taken shape in Egypt after 1952 viewed any domestic criticism of its policies, leaders, and security institutions in particular as a collaboration with outside forces and a rending of 'the national fabric'.

In a televised interview in May 2014, Sisi invoked the defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967 and its enormous impact on the state, a multivalent historical reference that evokes more than simply external aggression. Indeed, more than once, he raised the possibility of a domestic strike against the machinery of state. This reference raises many questions, which constitute the main focus of this paper: How did Sisi reconstitute authoritarianism and dominate the state and its apparatus? What factors laid the groundwork? And, in keeping with Sisi's own allusion, how does this compare to Nasser's rule after 1967?

Drawing on other research and an analysis of President Sisi's speeches, this paper posits four answers to these questions. Firstly, we examine the 2013 coup and the importance of the 'mandate' in restoring authoritarianism. Secondly, we look at Sisi's discourse and the elements of it—for example, the invocation of state collapse and the war on terror—that assisted his rise to power and supported his narrative of events, laying the groundwork for a practical strategy to assume control of state institutions and subordinate them to his rule. This includes the rise of the military state, which since the Nasser era has constituted a state within a state.

The third hypothesis reads Sisi as a symbol of salvation and sovereignty, and the military as a ruling party. It posits that what happened in Egypt after 2011 was the outcome of divergent and often violent ideological, political, and social interplay between four main forces: a military coup that intervened to depose Mubarak and pre-empt the unfolding of events; reformist forces of both a reactionary and progressive nature; the forces of the counterrevolution and the Mubarak regime; and revolutionary forces comprised of numerous social and political networks and movements striving to radically change Egyptian society, but of limited organisational capacity and lacking grassroots bases that could have defended them against the state or political Islam. The fluid, shifting nature of these forces, actors, positions, and alliances was the central feature of the socio-political conflict in Egypt in this period. The final theory holds that heightened social conflict, which devolved into communal strife and then waves of armed violence, enabled the military coup that began in 2011 to resolve the state of flux and contain demands for democratic change in Egypt. This explanation thus explores how the security establishment at large was re-armed to suppress political life in Egypt.

The machinery of rule shaped by Sisi in just a few years is stronger, nimbler, and more violent than that of any of his predecessors. Egypt is undergoing massive transformations on multiple levels, from the discourse, nature, and axes of power to a restructured economy, a political sphere transformed to eliminate politics and pursue a new strategy for rule, and a re-armed and newly empowered military establishment; to changes in the social order,[1] state-society relations, and the regime's social allies.

Sisi's regime is also quick on its feet, its swift decisiveness being a point of pride for Sisi and his supporters. Given the state's long experience in dealing with armed factions in Upper Egypt and Fayyoum since the 1980s and 1990s, the only population that has eluded its control are some armed groups involved in guerrilla war and terrorism in North Sinai.

A Mandate then a Coup: Back to Square One

In a 2019 article, Kevin Koehler and Holger Albrecht explore differences between coups and coup agents, and the implications of these differences for the type of government that follows the coup, taking Egypt as one of their examples.[2] There are regular coups, which, following Michel Foucault, we might define as the state acting against itself in order to preserve its current form.[3] In Egypt, preserving the state in its existing form was of central importance to the military establishment and a focal point of the conflict between Mubarak regime factions and Gamal Mubarak and his coterie of businessmen. After the revolution, saving the state became a key component of the military's discourse, reflecting its contemporary and historical view of government in Egypt. It then became an instrument and strategy for purging the Muslim Brotherhood from government and, to a great extent, from Egyptian society as a whole. The fear of the 'Brotherhoodisation' of the state—that is, Brotherhood control of the levers of state—and the transformation of Egypt into another Afghanistan or Syria was the principal anxiety fuelling socio-political conflict in Egypt.

Koehler and Albrecht write that 'since they are executed primarily by senior officers from the military's leadership, endgame coups are textbook examples of power struggles within the political elite'.[4] The 2013 coup fits with their definition of 'endgame coups'. Keeping in mind that the purpose of such coups, according to the authors, is to preserve the status quo of the state and political positions within it, Koehler and Albrecht explain that endgame coups typically take place amid mass mobilisation or demonstrations that outstrip the state's repressive capacity, seen in Egypt in 2013 with the mobilisation of various social constituencies and the emergence of Tamarod.[5] Recalling the events of Mohammed Mahmoud, Maspero, and Port Said in a 2019 speech, Sisi, who was the director of military intelligence during those events, said that Morsi intended to dissolve the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).[6] This, too, qualifies the 2013 coup as an endgame coup.

There is another, more important element, however—one that the 2013 authoritarian regime shares with Abdel Nasser's post-1967 state—and that is the mass demonstrations in support of military action. Mass demonstrations were staged in 1967 after the defeat in support of Nasser and, in turn, the ouster of Abdel Hakim Amer, his competitor and the central threat within the military establishment. Citizens also took to the streets in 2013 after Sisi gave a speech in support of the 30 June demonstrations, which movements like Tamarod saw as a green light to continue protests until Morsi stepped down.[7] Tamarod was the movement most responsible for the mobilisation of diverse forces and citizens, starting with its petition demanding that Morsi call early elections or heed the people's demands. In comparison, in 1952 and to some extent 2011, there was no mass support for direct intervention by the military establishment, a key element of endgame coups discussed by Koehler and Albrecht. The 1952 coup was staged by the Free Officers led by Gen. Mohammed Naguib, while in 2011, SCAF, led by Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, intervened after President Hosni Mubarak announced his abdication. To preserve the state—the primary beneficiary of which is the military establishment or other political institutions like the

Muslim Brotherhood—popular anger must be absorbed, converted into acquiescence, and then redirected.[8]

This acquiescence does not arise from a vacuum. Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have both written about it in their treatment of governmentality[9] and symbolic power,[10] each from their own perspective. For Foucault, governmentality is power married to knowledge; it is a set of institutions, procedures, and analyses that permits the exercise of power on the population. It is not solely the government apparatus itself, for this apparatus requires knowledge to exercise power.[11] A distinction here must be made between the population as Foucault conceives it, which is a group of individuals within a certain territory, and the people, which considers itself outside of the subject-sovereign relationship that links the ruler and the ruled.[12]

Part of Morsi's failure to govern the country was his inability to summon governmentality, in order to lead, or manage, the state apparatus and a people politicised in the wake of the 25 January uprising. In contrast, from 2011, the military claimed the capability and the right to administer the state and represent the people. The military establishment posited itself as the foundation of legitimate rule, invoking populist arguments (e.g., Egypt can only be ruled by a military man) and institutional and historical claims (e.g., the army represents the Egyptian people; it embodies the Egyptian national spirit; it is the most capable, disciplined, and modern institution in Egypt; it is a shield and the best suited to lead Egypt through the security and military dangers threatening the country).

The military presented itself to the masses as a representative of the people, the best qualified and most well-versed in the technologies and strategies of population management; from the military's ideological perspective, other forces either did not represent the people or were unfamiliar with all dimensions of society and therefore unfit to govern. The military sees itself as the nucleus of the Egyptian state, and numerous other state institutions and broad segments of the public concur. This allowed it to stake out a claim on two important fronts: as the most qualified to grip the reins of state and administer the state bureaucracy and institution—in other words, it was needed to govern within the state apparatus—and as the best representative of the Egyptian people.

This leads us to the issue of symbolic power. Derived from outside the political sphere, symbolic power is manifested and defined through the relationship between the agent exercising the power and the party that recognises it and submits to it.[13] According to Bourdieu, symbolic power is capable of constructing reality and imbuing the social world with immediate, direct meaning.[14] This illuminates the importance of Sisi's final speeches before the coup. The speeches enhanced the symbolic power of the military and acquiescence to it while the people recognised the military as the representative of the will or demands of the people. Through the exercise of symbolic power, the military thus achieved concrete gains. After this, the discourse of power began to shift again.

Sisi's Rise and Shifts in the Discourse of Power

As Abdel Fattah El-Sisi began to rise through the nexus of power in Egypt, he relied on three main props: first, intelligence and his management of security affairs in Egypt from 2011 until he assumed the presidency in 2014; second, his ability to articulate a strong discourse, which though at times was opaque and garbled, resonated strongly with society and state (even when Sisi cooperated with the Islamists during his tenure as defence minister, he managed to present a religious and political discourse attractive to Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood); third, his favourable position within the network of regional alliances and his deft exploitation of international conditions.

Sisi's star began to rise on the night of 28 January 2011 when Egyptian revolutionaries dealt Interior Ministry forces a resounding defeat, leading to the collapse of much of the security infrastructure and the myth of Habib al-Adli's invincibility. As the military deployed to take control of the country, military intelligence assumed centre stage after waiting in the wings since the 1970s. Conflicts within the security apparatus grew fiercer during the revolution, specifically between General Intelligence led by Omar Suleiman, who attempted to take the lead early in the revolution, and the SCAF led by Tantawi. The conflict lent further weight and importance to the military intelligence agency, which was then headed by Sisi. Military intelligence became the brain behind the SCAF and its main source of domestic information and intelligence. As socio-political conflict heightened in Egypt, the agency gained in importance and was increasingly relied on. When State Security headquarters were stormed, it was military intelligence that seized all the files. Not a man to stand in the shadows, Sisi stepped into the limelight as he gained in influence. Military intelligence organised a series of talks with revolutionary youth and Islamist forces, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation, with Sisi presiding over these meetings.

The early years of the revolution gave Sisi a golden opportunity to control the real levers of power in Egypt: the security apparatus. By 19 November 2011—during the events of Mohammed Mahmoud—Sisi was already managing the battle and the security apparatus, as he recently affirmed. The general placed himself in the thick of events and gatherings—particularly through social media—occupying a central position within the halls of power and among various political forces. He had a handle on every aspect of the conflict thanks to the information and knowledge he gained by dint of his official position and his direct material control of the security apparatus, which managed domestic affairs. Sisi personally oversaw the smallest details.[15]

As a student and confidante of Tantawi, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi enjoyed significant personal power, while his management of military intelligence enhanced his institutional power. In this period, he also managed to win the trust of the Muslim Brotherhood. Several of his personal characteristics endeared him to the Brotherhood as a fellow traveller—his piety and conservatism, his family's appearance—and he was careful to highlight his religious observance to the Brotherhood leadership. After Tantawi and Gen. Sami Anan were retired from the scene, the military establishment let it be known that it would permit no action against Sisi, which it would see as 'tantamount to the "whole political system committing suicide"'.[16] Sisi thus became defence

minister under Morsi, although the latter sought to replace him with Gen. Ahmed Wasfi when Sisi disobeyed his orders by imposing a curfew in the Suez Canal zone in March 2013.[17] In addition, Sisi's master's thesis, written in the US, took as its topic political Islam and democracy. He therefore had theoretical knowledge as well as practical experience in dealing with Islamists.

At the same time, suspicions about Sisi's loyalties were rife, and he was rumoured to be a member of the Brotherhood, an impression bolstered by Brotherhood propaganda. Numerous political forces and social constituencies were uncertain about Sisi's position and stance on the socio-political conflict until 3 July, when the army deposed Morsi. But within the halls of power and among senior state leadership, particularly the army and police, many were familiar with Sisi's discourse about the importance of state cohesion and strong state institutions, his view that religion had no place in state institutions and that 'there is no religious state in Islam', and that rulers were responsible for reforming the representation of religion.[18]

The nature and structure of the discourse of power radically shifted with Sisi's assumption to rule. Egypt has a long history of the discourse of emergency and exception, and the reinforcement of the police state. Foreign conspiracies also became an element of this discourse after the army seized power, against the backdrop of the conflict with Israel and imperialist forces. Both Sadat and Mubarak, and especially the latter, exploited the rhetoric of security, as 'Islamic terrorism', development, and peace became intimately bound up with security. Despite the peace and rapprochement with Israel, Mubarak deftly deployed the rhetoric of conspiracies hatched by foreign forces and Israel as key pillars of his security discourse. Mubarak successfully managed an on-going process of 'securitising' political discourse, meaning he transformed every social or political issue into a purely security concern.

Sisi took this discourse to another level, going beyond the conventional security discourse of the Mubarak era by turning it into an ontological, existential discourse focused on the survival of the state itself rather than a set of looming dangers. In the language of Carl Schmitt,[19] Sisi was able to create a discourse of exception par excellence, which revolved around the severity of the threat to state survival. It is no wonder, then, that he positioned himself as a sovereign and saviour of the state and society, rather than a safety valve or guarantor of stability like Mubarak. With this discourse, he successfully united the state and large segments of society behind and around him.

This discourse resonated with and reflected reality on several levels: the widespread panic over a potential civil war; the fear of the state apparatus itself of being shunted aside and replaced by the Brotherhood, heightened by the fact that the Interior Ministry had yet to recover from its defeat by the revolution, when it collapsed in a matter of hours; and finally, the growing impatience of a broad swathe of society with the chaos and instability sweeping the country. The 'civil war' envisioned here was not the type seen in Lebanon or Rwanda, or during the breakup of Yugoslavia. The nature and composition of Egyptian society is different and does not allow for open conflict between armed factions, and the centralised state remains a powerful force.

Rather, the spectre of civil war in Egypt was raised by violent communal clashes in Cairo, Alexandria, and parts of the Delta. It was feared that these would spin out of control into broader communal conflict, generate a security vacuum in one region that would give rise to armed

factional conflict or armed action against the state—which did indeed occur in North Sinai—or turn into open sectarian confrontations between Christians and Islamists. The latter fears were vindicated after the coup of 3 July 2013 in Upper Egypt, which saw a wave of church burnings and assaults on Christians. The state seized on these fears and conflicts, leading the battle charge itself through the security and military apparatus.

Under the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt witnessed two extremely significant developments: the explosion of the political sphere and the concomitant failure of politics to resolve conflicts, and the intensification of social and ideological conflict. In stable, liberal democracies, politics is the flipside of civil war. According to thinkers like Bourdieu and Chantal Mouffe, the political arena is the peaceful, institutional iteration of communal conflict, through which power struggles are channelled into disputes over representation and political platforms, legitimising the use of the state bureaucracy and resources by various political groups. The political sphere in Egypt and the attempt to build a representative democracy could not withstand the successive waves of conflict because of the fragility, novelty, and instability of the political sphere itself, as well as because of the heightened political conflict on the ground and the various waves of dissatisfaction with the meagre reforms achieved after the revolution. This was coupled with a panic over Islamists and a fear of state takeover.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that modern totalitarianism can be defined as 'the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system'.[20] This aptly captures the state of Egypt after 2013, illustrated by the violent reinstatement of the state of emergency, the adoption of the law criminalising protest and the terrorism and terrorist entities law, and the massive expansion in military trials. These laws and instruments did not target the Muslim Brotherhood exclusively, but were deployed to cripple civil society, both advocacy and development-oriented associations, and imprison leftist and liberal political activists. They were also used against various non-politicised social constituencies, for example communities that attempted to resist state-enforced land evictions, researchers, residents of Warraq Island whom the state sought to remove to convert the island into an investment project, and residents of the North Coast around the Dabaa area, where the state located a nuclear reactor. Broad swathes of Egyptian society were caught up in the machinery of totalitarianism as the regime waged a legal civil war.

Sisi as a Symbol of Salvation and Sovereignty

The media, intelligence, and state bureaucracy joined forces to turn Sisi into a symbol of deliverance, the saviour of both the state and the people. This resonated with many Egyptians' desire to see an end to the revolutionary situation and politics more broadly, as a collective struggle over resources and power. By successfully 'leading' or directing the politicised people to grant him a mandate, Sisi made a decisive break with the revolutionary and political momentum seen in

Egypt since 2011, derailing the democratic transition and insulating the state and its institutions from the radical critique it had faced.

We should pause here at the debate over the arguments advanced by the revolution and the counterrevolution to emphasise that after the opening of the political sphere, both the military and the Brotherhood sought to dominate the existing state, to which their own interests had been tethered for several years. The Brotherhood constituted a political, economic and social institutional power under the Mubarak regime, as showed by Mary Vannetzel in her recent book[21] and Hazem Kandil in his coverage of the internal workings of the Brotherhood.[22] The people, then, were the sole revolutionary party, but one part of it was transformed into a counterrevolutionary force by power (or symbolic power), leadership, and the granting of a mandate to Sisi.

Armed with this mandate, Sisi was able to position himself outside the socio-political conflict, styling himself not as a political actor like the other parties, but as a representative of the state in its war for survival against its enemies and the enemies of society—namely, the Muslim Brotherhood. This does not mean that the state and military actually stood outside the conflict, but rather that Sisi was able to successfully harness the symbolic power of this image and that of the military as the guardian and arbiter of competing parties. This dynamic is not specific to Egypt; it is the way the state strives to present itself to all classes, as an entity independent of and uninvolved in political and class conflict, as Poulantzas explains.[23] In fact, this conception of the army as the protector of democracy and the final arbiter of conflict would find a place in the Egyptian constitution with the amendments of 2019. Bahey eldin Hassan observes, 'In contrast to Tunisia and Sudan, the Egyptian military is politicised and has substantial political ambitions, having limited the rotation of power to its own leadership ranks since 1952'.[24]

Yet, the military still possesses enough symbolic power to present itself as above political conflict. The military's removal of Mubarak, its refusal to crack down on the protests in Tahrir Square, and its avoidance of violent clashes with demonstrators throughout the eighteen days of the 2011 revolution further enhanced this symbolic power. The structural inability of revolutionary forces to seize power in 2011 encouraged them to accept military action, in order to advance the movement and achieve some of their demands. The coup was thus a popular demand, whether tacit or openly declared, from the very first day of the revolution until 3 July 2013. The revolutionary desire for the coup enabled the military to present itself less as a party to the conflict than a referee. While it may indeed have acted as an arbiter, the military was also a central party to the conflict.

The invocation of a 'war' to 'save the state' gave Sisi more power and popularity than any of his predecessors. Abdel Nasser himself did not begin his rule in 1954 with a level of popularity approaching Sisi's in 2013. Sisi was also able to lead the Egyptian state's prosecution of a sublimated 'civil war' in the struggle for control of the state apparatus.[25] This differentiated his battle with political Islam from the ones that came before. First of all, this was the first time that the Muslim Brotherhood chose to enter into open, broad conflict with the state itself and the military as an institution. Even at the height of the conflict between the Brotherhood and Nasser, the former did not attack the military establishment politically, ideologically, or materially, or even the Interior Ministry as an institution.

Secondly, other Islamist actors like Salafis and jihadis joined the Muslim Brotherhood in its struggle, and persistent armed conflict erupted in Sinai. The on-going war in Sinai fundamentally differs from Nasser's conflict with the Brotherhood in 1954 and 1965 and the state's war on armed violence in the 1980s and 90s. In a paper comparing jihadi thought within the Brotherhood in 1954, 1965, and 2013, drawing on the guidelines found in the Brotherhood publications 'The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup' (2015) and 'The Kinana Declaration' (2013)[26] Ahmed Zaghloul Shalata explains that jihad as combat was a key concept within the organisation since its inception under Hassan al-Banna, and a faction of the Brotherhood adopted this understanding of jihad after the 2013 coup.

All of this was taking place against the backdrop of the 2011 popular revolution and an exhausted state, some of its arms nearly defeated and seeking to regain control of the country. Moreover, the first three years of the revolution, particularly 2013, saw the judiciary and judges enter the fray as political agents, acting institutionally and ideologically; at no other time in its modern history had Egypt seen judges so thoroughly involved in socio-political conflict.

Conditions were ripe for Sisi to seize the state and subordinate it to his sovereignty and control. With a clear strategy and new discourse, Sisi successfully consolidated his authority. The streets of Egypt were awash with photos of the popular hero and saviour of Egypt—his image even appeared on cakes and sweets. This, combined with his incessant rhetoric about imminent state collapse, allowed Sisi to instrumentalise the state apparatus to manipulate nationalist sentiment. Street mobs all over Egypt attacked any group opposed to Sisi's policies or individuals expressing a political opinion at the café. These mobs were not working under the security or police apparatus as in the past; they were largely crowds of people with no links at all to security. This rising fascism made its way into families as well, used mostly against youth who opposed both military and religious rule. This nationalist discourse reinforced the resentment and demonisation of the Brotherhood, which was portrayed as an entity alien and hostile to the national fabric, seeking to dismantle the historical sense of Egyptian nationhood. The private and state-run media machine worked assiduously to demonise and de-Egyptianise the Brotherhood, further dehumanising the group with a discourse that branded them as 'sheep'.

Sisi managed to strike a resonant, though discordant, note with the public: He styled himself not only as a pious, conservative Muslim but also as the protector of enlightened intelligentsia, women, Copts, and other minorities against the tyranny of Islamist extremism. In this context, he brought the Coptic Church fully over to his side in the war on the Brotherhood and political Islam, cultivating ties with the church by attending Christmas mass and giving it greater latitude in the construction of churches. Although the Copts' minority status and the state of sectarian conflict was not structurally transformed, the deliberate courting of the church and Pope Tawadros II and Sisi positioning himself as the protector and defender of Copts' rights as Egyptian citizens did win over a great many regular Copts and the institution of the church. Sermons lauding Sisi were heard in pulpits around the country. More importantly, amid the fear of direct material harm, death, and injury, this strategy entirely eliminated internal Coptic dissent, rallying Copts behind the church

and rapidly silencing those voices and political movements critical of both the military establishment and the church leadership.

Sisi came to power in Egypt after securing the loyalty and support of broad, diverse social constituencies and also tightening his grip on the state apparatus. Yet, when he ran for president, he declared that he was beholden and indebted to no one, saying 'I've got no bills outstanding to anyone'. This sentiment is entirely consistent with the kind of primordial nationalism present from the beginning and buttressed by Sisi: He became a man for everyone and no one, turning himself into a symbol that everyone could interpret in their own way. He was a protector of Copts, a defender of women, the saviour and protector of the state, the patron of intellectuals protecting Egypt from the Islamist darkness, and an exemplar of the moderate Islam championed by al-Azhar and the Endowments Ministry (although his religious moderation did not mean that he did not clash with al-Azhar when it came to infringements of the institution's independence and religious opinions[27]). In the early days of his rise, he was also the Nasserists' man, a worthy successor to Abdel Nasser who would restore Egypt's former stature and glory.

Nor did Sisi make any political promises to institute democracy or strengthen and cement democratic mechanisms. He was very clear, speaking only of his project to save the state, enhance its power, and end the state of anarchy. The most clarifying moments in the establishment of his rule are his mandate speech and the clearing of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins. As he demanded a military and popular mandate to prosecute a potential civil war, Sisi's body language spoke volumes: He faced his audience decked out in full military regalia and sunglasses (military conventions dictate that only the high commander can address soldiers and officers wearing sunglasses; conversely, subordinates may not wear them in front of the high commander). Radiating toughness and combativeness, he addressed himself to military personnel and demanded that civilians grant him an open-ended mandate. It was a unique moment: a political appeal to the public to eject them from politics and depoliticise public affairs entirely, turning 'politics' into a purely securitised, militarised endeavour.

In the dispersal of the sit-ins, Sisi proved his capacity for maximum violence, committing one of the worst atrocities in modern Egypt but with popular consent and regional support, and amid international anger that he would later assuage. Sisi posited two extremely powerful narratives to justify the dispersal. The first, a statist narrative, said that he was killing to preserve the modern nation state in Egypt and combating the threat of state collapse like that seen in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. The second was formulated in purely religious terms: He was killing a group of Kharijites, a heterodox, dissident sect that was seeking to lay waste to the Muslim community.

The media and religious establishments helped Sisi promote these two narratives simultaneously. Ali Gomaa, the former endowments minister, played a highly significant role in mobilising soldiers, officers, and the general public around this war. The mandate was an exemplary moment, giving the state license to engage in oppression and violence with a perfect veneer of legitimacy and consensus. This made it an extremely effective moment, as demonstrated in the arguments of Terry Eagleton or Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony and the role of consensus in building it.[28] According to Gramsci, hegemony is not constituted solely in the use of

physical force, but also in the exercise of power through ideas and culture, or what he calls cultural hegemony.[29]

The Army as Ruling Party

Despite Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's overwhelming popularity when he declared his presidential candidacy, he presented himself as a military man through and through rather than as a ruler with a military background, as had been the case in Egypt since 1952. He therefore announced his intent to run for president after 'notifying' the armed forces, he said in a televised interview on CBC in May 2014, adding, 'The general commander does not seek permission'.[30] Two elements of symbolic import are seen in Sisi's declaration of candidacy and the media narrative around it. Firstly, Sisi declared candidacy wearing his regular military uniform rather than the dress uniform, suggesting that he was on a military mission, tasked by the army to rule Egypt. Secondly, his campaign posters and events at times bore a photo of him in uniform and prominently featured his rank of field marshal. The title of the CBC interview, for example, was 'Field Marshal Sisi in his first television appearance'. This captures the contradiction in the identity of the current president: Is he a military man, or a civilian politician with a military background? This is reflected in the contradictory media and state narrative of events in 2013, which held that what happened was not a coup, but rather a second revolution, because Sisi had received a popular mandate and the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, had been appointed president pending the 2014 elections.

In fact, Sisi constructed a new regime model in Egypt, abandoning both Nasser's pluralist or one-party system (the Arab Socialist Union) and the quasi-pluralist, authoritarian system based on a civilian ruling party (the National Democratic Party) of Mubarak and Sadat. Instead he relied wholly on the military and security establishment to govern and administer the state and even the economy. The main players in the economic landscape are the Engineering Authority and the National Service Agency, both divisions of the military. In effect, Sisi turned the army into a ruling party and the most significant market player in the country, which is quite unlike the state capitalist model under Nasser. As Anouar Abdel-Malek discusses in his analysis of the period from 1952 to 1967,[31] a new bourgeoisie was created after 1952 as feudalists and the private sector was liquidated and nationalised. This is somewhat comparable to the current regime, but with the difference that the army in 1952 represented an engine for progress and urbanisation. Whereas then the military both built and nationalised factories, today it is the conduit for investment and the main economic player within a neoliberal system, seeking to dominate the market and directly partner with foreign investors while subcontracting out segments of the market to others.

In other words, Sisi did not transform the structure or model of the economy; he merely rearranged the players in the market, making the military the principal avenue into any economic activity. This model is particularly visible in road projects and the army's acquisition of factories and resources like quarries, the marble industry, and part of the cement industry (although the regime does permit foreign companies like Lefarge and Titan a larger share of the cement industry

in Egypt), as well as in land acquisition. Indeed, the military has become the biggest investor and landowner in the country; the new administrative capital and New Alamein are good examples of this reality.

Sisi has achieved what no other ruler has since 1952, managing to discard the social compact underlying the military state's legitimacy: security, services, and support in exchange for freedom. He has relieved the state of its economic and financial burdens, freeing it of its social obligation to citizens to provide services at low or no cost and commoditised state services as part of the neoliberal market. Liberating the state budget of these obligations has given him greater latitude to pursue his projects and his vision of economic administration. His austerity policies, elimination of subsidies, and government spending cuts have earned him praise and approval from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. At the same time, he has preserved the authoritarian nature of the state, which has increased its capacity for repression and further curtailed civil and political liberties.

All of these measures spoke to the deep sense of marginalisation felt within the military establishment. The military's role in politics and its grip on the levers of government have declined since the conflict within the army between Nasser and Abdel Hakim Amer from the early 1960s to the 1967 defeat. Khaled Fahmy has discussed the structural changes to the state after 1967, particularly after the sentencing of air force personnel in 1968, which prompted demonstrations protesting the light sentences.[32] Among the changes was the creation of the Central Security Forces (CSF) as a new instrument of repression. Sadat successfully excluded the army from direct administration and control, supplanting it with the Interior Ministry, specifically the CSF, which assumed the military's role as regime protector, and State Security, which managed Egypt from the 1970s until the 2011 revolution. Meanwhile, the ruling party managed the social competition for resources, influence, and control in various Egyptian governorates. Sisi exploited the military's sense of marginalisation to give the army free rein in economic, social, and political life.

Although the overriding anxiety of the security and ruling apparatus in Egypt since 1952 has been a countercoup, Sisi does not appear to face much risk in this regard. Coming from military intelligence has enabled him to control that institution and involve it in a wide-ranging battle against armed violence. The major shuffles in the ranks of military leadership demonstrate how handily Sisi has taken the reins within the military establishment. The goal of all these measures—known as 'coup proofing'[33]—is to minimise the potential for the emergence of defined cliques within the state apparatus that might seize power. Examples of coup-proofing include the replacement of military leaders and strengthening the CSF under Sadat.[34] Sisi has engaged in similar tactics, in 2018 replacing Defence Minister Sidqi Sobhi, who had been a major partner in Sisi's smooth rise to power. He also replaced the army chief of staff with Mahmoud Hegazi. Currently, he does not appear to face any figures within the military establishment too strong to remove. Although there have been two military cases prosecuted accusing a group of officers of attempting a coup,[35] there seems to be no imminent or extraordinary threat from within the military. Thus far, Sisi has proved capable of managing and replacing figures in important positions to avoid any attempt to seize power from within the military establishment.

Consolidating Rule: Eliminating Politics and Re-arming Institutions

Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has managed to strangle the political sphere that took shape after the revolution, abandoning Mubarak's formula of allowing the opposition and Muslim Brotherhood a small margin of freedom. Sisi does not only suppress political action; he stifles it at the source, allowing politics no ground to develop and manoeuver. He has learned several lessons from the January revolution: firstly, unify various state forces and agencies, support and reinforce the security apparatus, and do not tolerate the emergence of any factional conflict within the state; secondly, give opposition and youth movements no latitude for action; and thirdly, violently suppress and persecute opponents, whether through imprisonment, defamation, or media demonisation.

Sisi has also harnessed the desire of the armed forces and police to regain their power in order to win their trust, presenting himself as their saviour and the man responsible for developing and modernising their institutions. Exploiting his regional ties to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, he has newly armed both the army and the police. Egypt became the world's third largest weapons importer from 2014 to 2018, after Saudi Arabia and India, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Egypt's weapons imports increased three-fold between 2009–2013 and 2014–2018.[36] The Egyptian military has been armed by France, Germany, and Russia, while continuing to purchase American weapons as part of the assistance provided under the Camp David Accords. Saudi Arabia also reportedly contributed to Egypt's Mistral deal with France.[37] The Interior Ministry has been shored up with equipment, armoured and other vehicles, ammunition and tear gas, and the right to produce ammunition. Billions of dollars' worth of spying equipment and technology has also been imported, often with the help of the UAE.[38] The arming of the Interior Ministry and the development of surveillance technologies is understandable given the regime's domestic war against the Muslim Brotherhood and 'terrorist groups', as well as its offensives against democratic forces. The arming of the Interior Ministry has made it stronger, improving morale and giving it a renewed sense of mastery over society following its defeat on 28 January 2011.

The extensive expansion of the military's armed capacity can be analysed from several perspectives. Firstly, it is a way to appease the army as an institution and shore up support for Sisi, guaranteeing the establishment's loyalty by developing its capacities. Springborg interprets this from a different angle: Sisi's confidence in the military and his ability to monitor it and guarantee its loyalty has allowed him to upgrade and restructure some divisions and operations, while domestic and regional challenges have necessitated arms upgrades and diversification.[39] The diversification of weapons suppliers has had a positive impact within the military, boosting Sisi's stature as the first person capable of diversifying weapons' sources since Camp David, at least in the eyes of many officers. In doing so, Sisi has also responded effectively to repeated American threats to cut off military aid.

Secondly, the expansion of military capacity should be seen against the backdrop of the regional arms race and existing tensions in the region. Sisi has more than once offered Egypt to the Gulf as a possible fighting force. This prompted Sisi in January 2018 to sign a CISMOA with Washington, an agreement that is legally required before the US can provide encrypted communications systems to allies, enabling real-time, direct communications[40] and interoperability with US allies in the Gulf. Egypt had resisted the signing the CISMOA for thirty years. Thirdly, Sisi's weapons purchases have bought Western nations' silence on human rights violations and broken the embargo some states tried to impose on Egypt after the army assumed control on 3 July 2013.

To sum up, early in his rise, Sisi won over large swathes of society anxious about Islamist hegemony. His rhetoric of imminent state collapse resonated broadly, making him extremely popular and allowing him to engage in staggering repression. Despite his ebbing popularity due to harsh economic policies, he was able to consolidate his rule and impose a fait accompli after a successful rise. He took advantage of the regional conflict to secure the generous support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia and re-arm his institutions. He then took full control of the state apparatus, subordinating all its institutions and using them—particularly, the police, judiciary, and military— to persecute his enemies. With the most recent constitutional amendments that allow him to remain in office after the end of his term, he has fully co-opted the judiciary, which had previously enjoyed some measure of independence that allowed it to spar with Sisi, as for example in the case of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir that were ceded to Saudi Arabia.

Unlike his predecessors, Sisi has not secured his rule through the creation of a strong political organisation to act as his main social and political ally. Rather, he has united the state apparatus behind him and presented himself to the general public as the nation's saviour and protector. Speaking during a ceremony to commemorate Martyrs' Day on 9 March 2021, he declared that the inauguration of the new administrative capital, which has been in the works since he assumed power in 2014, marks the birth of a new republic and a new state.[41] The state itself has been fully transformed into the military institution, now freed from the state that had existed around it since the Nasser era.

Conclusion

Since 2011, Egypt has been under the control of the military, represented first by SCAF and then Sisi since 2013. The people were instrumentalised to take the seat of centralised decision-making power—namely, the presidency—followed by steps to create a militarised society, with economic and other privileges for the military not seen in previous eras. The explosion of the political sphere, and the conflict between the state and revolutionary groups and between the latter and the Brotherhood, followed by the eruption of armed violence, resolved the structural impasse in the conflict since 2011 in favour of the military coup. War was the sole formula by which the coup consolidated its position and outmatched reformists, revolutionaries, and political Islam. The security paradigm that emerged in July 2013 was sufficient to give the military the upper hand in its partnership with civilian political forces. No other political forces possessed the military's

symbolic and material power, which was compounded by the wave of 30 June and the subsequent 'war on terror'. Against the background of regional conditions, civil wars, and state disintegration, the state was empowered to use maximum violence and repression on the pretext of saving the state.

With his control over the levers of state, Sisi successfully aborted the democratic transition. Indeed, he went further than simply reconstituting a Mubarak-style authoritarianism by creating an exceptional dictatorship and then installing himself as the de facto dictator. Unlike Nasser, Sisi need not grapple with any strong partners or competitors controlling the sovereign agencies, nor is his regime beset by structural rifts like that of Mubarak, which was weakened by conflicts within the security apparatus and the conflict between Gamal Mubarak and his emerging elite and the military. He was able to create a dictatorship through popular mandate and broad popularity, as well as by assuming full control of the state apparatus, eliminating any margin for legal action and the rule of law, and neutering the relatively independent judiciary, creating a regime that more closely resembles twentieth-century fascism than an authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian system.

The war on terrorism buttressed the cohesion of state institutions and made state personnel even more fearful of the fall of Sisi lest they face prosecution and accountability. Egypt's involvement in the central regional conflict against political Islam and armed violence has enmeshed it more fully in sometimes contradictory regional alliances. Egypt is clearly allied with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but for the same reasons, it also maintains ties with Syrian/Russian/Iranian alliance. Its main regional foe is the Qatari-Turkish axis. Security arrangements in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, efforts to regulate illegal migration, and the conflict in Libya have determined Europe's attitude toward Sisi at the expense of human rights and freedoms. Sisi has therefore faced no real international sanction or isolation; Trump's support also helped him to entrench his rule.

The rearming of the Egyptian military and the diversification of weapons suppliers proved to be an extremely successful strategy for Sisi domestically, enhancing his popularity within the military establishment and guaranteeing its loyalty. On the international front, it has made him a significant consumer and importer of European weaponry. In contrast to Mubarak, Sisi exploits his international and domestic position to crush any opposition. He has effectively eliminated political activism and the various movements that peopled the political landscape in 2010 and gained steam after the revolution, presiding over an unprecedented deterioration in the status of civil rights and liberties.

Finally, Sisi has successfully led the state itself in an all-out war against the revolution. Ultimately, the coup is the manifestation and demonstration of the state.[42] After the military took full control of the state and all of its symbolic and institutional power, it used these to counter the revolution and the revolutionary movement within the social order.

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[1] In the original text of this article in Arabic, the authors prefer to use the term 'ijtima' over 'mujtama' when discussing 'social order'. However, the nuances of this difference are irrelevant to the English translation.

[2] Koehler, Kevin, and Holger Albrecht (2019) 'Revolutions and the Military: Endgame Coups, Instability, and Prospects for Democracy', *Armed Forces and Society* 47 (1), pp. 148–176.

[3] Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977–78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 262.

[4] Koehler and Albrecht, p. 15.

[5] Tamarod was created during Morsi's tenure, at the outset spearheading a petition and signature campaign against him. Koehler and Albrecht, p. 7.

[6] The speech was given in 2019 to mark Martyrs' Day, accessed 15 April 2021, https://youtu.be/Wammtn_jJ7w.

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[8] Foucault, pp. 192–199.

[9] Ibid., pp. 108–110.

[10] Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power* (Oxford: Polity Press), p. 170.

[11] Foucault, pp. 108–109.

[12] Ibid., pp. 43, 270–271.

[13] Bourdieu, p. 170.

[14] Ibid., p. 166.

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[25] Following Bourdieu's analysis of internal conflicts within the state apparatus, p. 181.

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