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Egypt’s Presidential Election: Turning a Corner?

By Michael C. Hudson

Key points

- Pre-election violence and repression
- Explaining Sisi’s landslide victory
- Economy in free-fall
- Muslim Brotherhood: down but not out
- GCC to the rescue
- Washington’s reluctant acquiescence
- A short honeymoon for Sisi

On May 26 and 27 Egyptians go to the polls to elect a new president following the tumultuous events following the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in the uprising of 2010-11. The masses had demanded an end to authoritarianism and the beginning of democracy. But in this election they overwhelmingly voted for the general, Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, who masterminded the coup of July 2013 that overthrew a democratically elected government headed by the Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi. Does the election signify the return full-circle of the authoritarian “deep state” or is it but another grim milestone on the road to yet another uprising? While the July coup had broad popular support from Egyptians who were fed up with the heavy-handed incompetence of the Morsi government during its brief one year tenure, it did not usher in a stable new order. On the contrary, Egypt has been plunged into unprecedented violence and brutal repression on the part of the military-led regime. Between July 2013 and early 2014 some 3,000 Egyptians were killed and 17,000 wounded in political violence. In the most egregious incident, upwards of 900 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers were gunned down by security forces in Cairo’s Raba’a al-Adawiya Square. Approximately 20,000 Egyptians have been imprisoned on political grounds. During the same period over 280 Egyptians, mostly soldiers and policemen, have been killed in a wave of terrorist attacks mainly in the Sinai peninsula but also in major cities. On April 28 an Egyptian court handed down no fewer than 683 death sentences, including the Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Badie.

Having rushed through a constitutional referendum in January 2014, with a 98 percent “yes” vote reminiscent of Egypt’s earlier fixed elections, that granted extraordinary power
to the military, the government called for a presidential election even before a new parliament could be elected. With the Egyptian media enlisted in the campaign for General Sisi, the branding of the Muslim Brotherhood as a “terrorist organization” and the arrest of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition supporters the prospects for a meaningful election that would confer legitimacy on the new President were poor. Opinion polls showed Sisi with just over 70 percent support and his only opponent, the left-wing nationalist politician Hamdeen Sabahi, with only 2 percent there was little doubt as to the outcome. The Muslim Brotherhood, now underground but with its grass-roots organization still intact, called for a boycott. Other groupings were split: some youth and liberals also called for boycott but others supported Sabahi. Among the conservative Muslim Salafis, the Nour party supported Sisi while others remained closer to the Muslim Brothers. While European Union election monitors were critical of the runup, their mere presence may have conferred a certain legitimacy on the proceedings. More critical, the Carter Center (headed by the former American president) declined to send observers at all, and it stated: "Egypt's political transition has stalled and stands on the precipice of total reversal."

The leading candidate General Sisi meanwhile sought to present himself as a civilian and a patriot standing above the political fray, not running a traditional campaign. His opponent, Sabahi, did run a traditional campaign claiming to be the candidate of the young, the liberal, and the poor. Walking a fine line, he too supported the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood yet also blamed Sisi for the turmoil since summer 2013. Supporters of both candidates sought to identify their man with the national hero Gamal Abdel Nasser, but Nasser’s daughter Hoda jumped into the Sisi camp, saying in an interview: “Do you know that you achieved in less than two months what politicians cannot achieve in decades? You have overwhelming support. Look at the opposition. It’s disassembled. Its leaders are not on your level in this great moment Egypt is currently witnessing."

For Egypt’s sake one might hope that she was right in her assessment, because the tasks he faces are immense. The economy is in free-fall. Unemployment is over 13 percent and three quarters of the unemployed are between 15 and 29 years old. The public debt is nearly 100 percent of gross domestic product. The World Bank has estimated that 25.5 percent of Egyptians fall below the poverty line, up from 16.7 percent in 2000. GDP growth in 2012 was only 2 percent, compared with 7 percent in 2000. In his recent speeches Sisi was vague about his economic and social policies, preferring to emphasize the security threats that Egypt faces.

For the moment, however, there is no doubt that Sisi has some very powerful supporters both at home and abroad. The bureaucrats in the civil service, the security organizations, the military, and the feloul, the remnants of the old regime that have benefited from the state’s patronage, have rallied to Sisi (many of them suspending their past liberal – democratic leanings); and many poor, ordinary Egyptians have joined as well, if only because he holds out the promise of stability. The General will also have important foreign supporters, some with deep pockets. The Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have pledged US$ 17 billion to prop up the Egyptian economy since the July coup. How long they are prepared to do this, however, is another question. And as
for Egypt’s biggest protector and ally, the Obama administration, despite its verbal reprimand over the repression, shows every indication of willingness to continue its longstanding military and security assistance programs; but members of Congress are threatening to put a hold on such aid. As Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat from Vermont) declared after Egypt announced the 683 death sentences, “It is an appalling abuse of the justice system….it shows a dictatorship run amok.”

In American politics and elsewhere analysts often speak of the “honeymoon period” which newly elected leaders enjoy before encountering serious opposition, especially if they have not been able to grapple successfully with the country’s problems. Clearly, President Sisi will have his honeymoon period—but for how long? The Muslim Brotherhood top leadership has been decapitated but this vast organization with its networks throughout Egypt will not “disappear” as Sisi has declared. More extreme organizations ready to employ terrorism are already making themselves felt. Social media have contributed to a political awakening in Egyptian society. And it is still not clear whether the new President has a program, or even an understanding, of Egypt’s huge social and economic programs.

So how long will Sisi’s honeymoon last? The reckoning may come sooner—perhaps in months—rather than later. While the election results would seem to indicate his widespread popularity there are also signs that the Egyptian public is less enthusiastic. A new Pew Research Center poll finds that Egyptians are now as dissatisfied about the direction of their country as they were just before the Uprising began at the end of 2010. It also shows that only a bare majority (54 percent) were in favor of the ouster of Morsi, and the same percentage indicates a favorable view of Sisi. Putting it another way, nearly half the public (43 percent) oppose the ouster of Morsi, and 45 percent express an unfavorable view of Sisi. Another issue is whether Sisi’s support from the more-or-less liberal, left-wing and nationalist elements will continue to hold; the military’s crackdown has not just been confined to the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the largesse that has been flowing from the Gulf to keep the Egyptian economy afloat may not last indefinitely. Sooner or later Gulf rulers will want to see results.

The Egyptian political scientist Hesham Sallam has put the matter succinctly: “….it is important to remember that even if the youth activists who served as the “face” of the 25 January Revolution are marginalized or in prison, the structural conditions and social imbalances that paved the way for mass revolt in January 2011 are still prevalent. While I am not saying that a resurgence in popular mobilization along the lines of 2011, 2012 and 2013 is imminent, it remains that every electoral contest since 2010 has proven that Egypt is a country where electoral outcomes, whether democratic or authoritarian, are not binding and subject to the possibility of reversal. As we think about how the next president will manage the wide range of Egypt’s socio-economic grievances there is no reason to believe that a Sisi electoral victory is immune to that danger.”

1 If instability continues and if it triggers yet another popular upheaval the repercussions will be felt regionally and globally.

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17786/quick-thoughts_hesham-sallam-on-the-egyptian-presi