



Behind and beyond al-Sisi's bid

by Florence Gaub

The resignation of Egypt's government on 24 February has reignited the debate about the presidential ambitions of Defence Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Leaving the ministerial post would have given him the opportunity to exit the armed forces and finally declare his candidacy (only civilians can stand for office in Egypt) – but, for the time being, he remains a minister. Moreover, on 27 February, he became the first ever military figure to be appointed the head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. A post usually reserved for the president, al-Sisi has now been named by President Mansour as the formal commander-in-chief.

The move has raised anew the larger question of the military's role in Egypt's political landscape. If elected president, will al-Sisi's rule result in a military dictatorship, or will it lead to the military withdrawing from politics? All will depend on the Egyptian armed forces, and whether or not they can protect their institutional, economic, and symbolic roles and interests.

A political animal?

Although the Egyptian armed forces have several 'identities', they are first and foremost perceived to be political actors. This is primarily due to the decisive role that the military has played in Egypt's recent history: in 1952, it toppled the monarchy, and every president since then – with the exception of Muhammad Morsi and current interim President

Adly Mansour – has had a military background. But to simply conclude, therefore, that Egypt has been – or indeed will be – a *stratocracy* (a state run by the military), would be to misunderstand the complex manner in which Egyptian power dynamics have evolved over time.

While the Egyptian armed forces have traditionally enjoyed a privileged relationship with those in charge, they have also constituted a potential threat to the country's political leaders. Regardless of their background, whoever wanted to remain in power was required to simultaneously keep the military on board and in check. By failing to do so, Gamal Abdel Nasser faced serious challenges by Chief of Staff and Defence Minister Abdel Hakim Amer. And following Egypt's defeat against Israel in 1967 and attempts to remove the armed forces from politics, Anwar Sadat was assassinated by a fundamentalist officer during a military parade in 1981. Hosni Mubarak, a former air marshal, recognised that the politicisation of the armed forces not only endangered the political elite, it also jeopardised military effectiveness. As a consequence, he continued the existing professionalisation programme designed to depoliticise the military.

Tout d'abord, a military institution

Political involvement always has a negative effect on the military capabilities of armed forces: affecting their cohesion, discipline, appointment mechanisms, and meritocratic principles. A military coup

generally benefits only a handful of individuals and harms the institution at large – hence the frequent occurrence of counter-coups. The Egyptian military's principal interest is an institutional one: since its defeat in 1967, it has pursued the creation and maintenance of professional standards necessary to perform adequately in the military sense, and has sought to reduce political meddling through internal procedures.

However, a highly professional force needs to be flanked by adequate civilian oversight: the more professional a force becomes, the more it strengthens features which are useful for staging a coup: cohesion, command structure, strong bonds between officers and the troops, and material support. It is precisely in order to reduce this political threat that many dictators – such as Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qaddafi – deliberately weakened their own military institutions. Both Sadat and Mubarak, however, granted the military the necessary leeway to professionalise, and the Egyptian armed forces, although monitored by military intelligence, were *not* subject to coup-proofing measures.

Today, institutional interests precede all other concerns: Egypt's generals seek the freedom to operate along military lines and will fight attempts by politicians to meddle in their affairs. This occupational mindset was also reflected in its tacit acceptance of President Morsi's dismissal of then Minister of Defence Tantawi and Chief of Staff Anan. Contrary to public perception, the armed forces allowed this not because they accepted civilian control, but because it benefited the officer corps: the removal of two senior officers resulted in a promotion for several others.

An economic actor, too

The Egyptian military's economic role dates back to Sadat's presidency, and it is now involved in an estimated 15% of the country's economic activities. Faced with budget constraints following his liberal reform policies, Sadat allowed the armed forces to self-finance to a certain extent – a policy which Mubarak pursued further. Since then, the military is engaged in multiple bodies, which are active in fields ranging from civilian manufacturing to farming and services. Official statements put its income at €550 million per year, but this figure is estimated to be much higher. These attempts to self-finance have been accompanied by an ever-decreasing military budget: in 2012, at 1.7% of GDP, it was one of the lowest in the region.

Those in the military enjoy many economic perks. For example, as compensation for low pensions, retired officers have preferential access to positions in

state bureaucracies and privatised former state enterprises. The military budget of over €3 billion is also effectively administrated outside of civilian control, and American military aid (almost €1 billion a year) is handled directly by the armed forces.

With such privileges threatened by the liberal reform agenda of Mubarak's son Gamal, who was poised to become his successor, the surprise siding of the armed forces with the protesters in January 2011 can also be seen as a move designed to protect their economic interests – interests which President Morsi was later careful to preserve.

And a national symbol

The Egyptian military's third core interest lies in its relationship with the Egyptian people, and the preservation of its image as *the* national symbol. Tracing its origins back to Khedive Muhammed Ali and the creation of modern Egypt in the 19th century, it embodies – and seeks to embody – Egyptian nationalism. Its wars against Israel, its history of political involvement, its use of conscription, and its emotional attachment to Gamal Abdel Nasser all play into the military's narrative of being the cradle of modern Egypt.

Ultimately, it is this emotional bond which grants the armed forces a popular mandate to act, but it is also one that is not unbreakable. The criticism that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces faced during its 16-month rule between Mubarak and Morsi has not only left the military bruised – it has also led to its assessment that playing a political role is divisive and therefore incompatible with its desire to represent Egypt as a whole.

Three in one?

Although Egypt's military is involved in the country's politics, it has no ambition to engage actively in the business of government – provided that its core interests are protected. Whenever any of these are threatened, it will use its political leverage to protect them. If this is not the case, it prefers to remain in the barracks and focus on its main task: guaranteeing Egypt's security.

Should al-Sisi become president – a December poll on the 'best political figure of 2013' ranked him first with 45%, followed by Amr Moussa with 7% – he will no doubt ensure that those interests are well protected.

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