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President Sisi's Delegative Authoritarianism

by Robert Springborg



ABSTRACT

The "coup-volution" of 2011 removed President Mubarak but not his authoritarian regime, which is now guided by his successor, President Abd al Fattah al Sisi. Both autocrats, there are nevertheless important differences between these two presidents and their respective regimes. Sisi's tougher authoritarianism is analogous to the Latin American prototype of "delegative democracy," a stalled phase of democratic institution building in which voters delegate their authority to the president, who rules unconstrained by balance of institutional powers. The primary feature of what in the Egyptian case might better be termed "delegative authoritarianism," is the decision-making autonomy of the president, who perceives himself as the "embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests." This results in erratic, inconsistent and ineffective policymaking, which isolates the president yet more from institutions and political forces, while causing the entire polity to be suffused with a deep cynicism. Although the most probable scenario is that Sisi will continue for the foreseeable future as Egypt's delegative dictator, as a one-man band his regime is inherently unstable and prone to coups, coup-volutions and outright revolutions. Sisi's Egypt provides an ideal model for the country's foreign supporters of how civilian control of armed forces can render government more effective in the discharge of its duties, including providing security for its people, something which delegative authoritarianism will never accomplish.

Egypt | Domestic policy | Authoritarianism



President Sisi's Delegative Authoritarianism

by Robert Springborg*

Introduction

Tomasi di Lampedusa's observation about *Risorgimento* Sicily, "everything must change so that everything can stay the same," seems apposite in contemporary Egypt.¹ The "coup-volution" of 2011 removed President Mubarak but, according to a common lament, not his authoritarian regime, which is now guided by his successor, President Abd al Fattah al Sisi.² While this characterisation of stability despite the appearance of change may be true in the broadest sense, the devil of authoritarian rule lies in its details, which differ substantially between these two regimes. Mubarak's path to the presidency, for example, did not lie through a free and fair election, whereas Sisi's did, albeit with the ground having been well prepared by the *coup d'état* of July 2013. Never truly popular, Mubarak at best enjoyed a grudging, resigned acceptance. By contrast, Sisi was already the most popular political figure in Egypt when serving as Minister of Defence under his predecessor, President Morsi. That popularity soared following Morsi's overthrow and has not subsequently dropped noticeably, with his presidential approval rating hovering in the 75-90 percent range. About four fifths of those polled say they would vote for him were there to be another presidential election.³

¹ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, London, Collins and Harvill Press, 1960.

² This apt term was coined by Nathan W. Toronto, "Egypt's Coup-Volution", in *Middle East Insights*, No. 6 (16 February 2011), <http://blog.nus.edu.sg/middleeastinstitute/?p=621>.

³ A December 2014 poll conducted by the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera) revealed an overall approval rating of 86 percent, with 79 percent of respondents reporting they would vote for him in a presidential election. The overall approval rating was down slightly from the same organization's poll results in the previous month, although the fall in "highly approve" responses was from 66 to 58 percent and yet more substantial among youths, which fell from 57 to 49 percent. In the November poll 82 percent of Egyptians reported they would vote for Sisi. See "Sisi's Approval Rating Shows Signs of Slipping, Suggests Poll", in *Mada Masr*, 15 December 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/node/12156>. Sisi's approval rating bounced back up by May 2015, when the same organisation's polling found it at an all-time high of 89 percent, with 72 percent of those over three highly approving his performance, compared with 55 percent of those under 30. See Emir Nader, "President al Sisi's Rates at All-time High Despite Worsening Security", in *Daily*

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Having been elected and possessing voter appeal are not Sisi's only differences from his predecessor. Mubarak presided over the National Democratic Party (NDP), the lineal descendant of the ruling party first founded by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Sisi ran for the presidency without any partisan identification and subsequently has refused to establish a new regime party, or indeed even to allow his name to be informally associated with any party in the gaggle of those now competing for his favour. Mubarak, like his predecessor, Anwar al Sadat, repeatedly spoke of building governing institutions and in fact both presidents invigorated several existing such organisations or built altogether new ones within the judicial, executive, and even legislative branches. By contrast, Sisi has manifested a studied disinterest in governmental institutions as he has in political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). No parliament has been elected during his rule; the independence of the judiciary has been further curtailed through subordination to the executive while its jurisdiction has been eroded by military courts; and despite the country's economic crisis, not a single new civilian governmental institution has been created in an effort to deal with it. The methods of control of the two presidents also differ. Mubarak distrusted the military, so elevated forces under the Ministry of Interior as a counterbalance. Sisi, confident of his ability to control the army, has taken the opposite course, subordinating security and intelligence forces to it. Finally, Mubarak paid lip service to democratisation while alternating political liberalisations with renewed restrictions on political activities. Sisi's discourse on democracy has been limited to a few words, especially those spoken in Western capitals, and he has presided over a unidirectional shrinkage of space for the political opposition.

In sum, both Mubarak and Sisi are autocrats, although the latter is a more popular one and their autocracies have operated differently. The key questions that follow from these observations are whether their regimes are fundamentally different species of the genus authoritarian and, if so, what might that difference imply for the trajectory of Sisi's regime.

Several different adjectives were used to qualify Mubarak's authoritarianism, including hybrid, competitive, soft, durable and new. The common element in these qualifiers was that the regime was not as tough as the pure authoritarian prototype, including as it did liberal, even democratic elements. The Economist Intelligence Unit, for example, differentiates between full democracies, flawed

News Egypt, 9 May 2015, <https://shar.es/1raOg5>. Data on polls conducted by Baseera are reported on the organization's website, http://www.baseera.com.eg/recentpolls_en.aspx. For a graphic presentation of data based on Baseera's five polls since Sisi has been president, see https://infogr.am/isis_approval_ratings. Founded in 2012 as an independent organisation, Baseera has rapidly become the most authoritative public source on Egyptian public opinion. Its most recent ratings of Sisi are based on a sample of almost 9,000 respondents drawn from all governorates. The margin for error in Baseera's findings is higher than that for restricted access polls sponsored by the United States government because Baseera polls by phone rather than in person and because of a relatively low response rate, which was 58 percent in the most recent poll. On its methodology, see http://www.baseera.com.eg/pdf_poll_file_en/President%20approval-%201%20year%20-%20En.pdf.

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democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes based on scores along five dimensions – electoral processes, governmental functioning, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. By these measures Egypt under Mubarak oscillated between hybrid and authoritarian status.⁴ Sisi's Egypt, classified as authoritarian, has sunk yet lower in the rankings, now being placed 138th out of 167 countries.⁵ How then can one account for the paradox of Sisi's Egypt being categorised as more unremittingly authoritarian than Mubarak's was despite Sisi's much greater popularity and the fact that, unlike Mubarak, he was voted into office in a competitive, reasonably free and fair election?

1. Delegative democracy/authoritarianism

A possible solution is to use an adjective applied to Latin American polities in order to qualify Sisi's paradoxically tougher authoritarianism and thereby differentiate it from the Mubarak hybrid predecessor. Coined in the early 1990s by Guillermo O'Donnell,⁶ "delegative democracy" was applied primarily to Latin American states that by then seemed no longer to be surging forward on the "third wave" of democratisation that had first welled up in Portugal in 1974 and then globalised. In contrast to representative democracy, delegative democracy was identified as a stalled phase of democratic institution building, in which an elected president feels "entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office."⁷ In these systems "horizontal accountability," which is that imposed by "a network of relatively autonomous powers (i.e., other institutions) that can call into question, and eventually punish, improper ways of discharging the responsibilities of a given official," is missing, so the only constraint on the executive is "vertical accountability," which is that imposed by voters through the ballot box.⁸ The voters delegate their authority to the president, who rules unconstrained by a balance of institutional powers. This, of course, begs the question of whether Egypt under Sisi is analogous to, say, Argentina under Carlos Menem, in the vital sense of whether Egyptian voters could really remove Sisi in a subsequent election. Unable to answer that question definitively, but assuming the answer is likely to be "no," it seems appropriate to strip away "democracy" from O'Donnell's term, leaving "delegative" as the adjective to be applied to Sisi's authoritarianism. Indeed, O'Donnell himself notes that the characteristics of delegative democracy are also those of "authoritarianism under

⁴ The rankings are included in the Economist's annual publication, *The World*. For the most complete discussion of the indices see Laza Kekic, "The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy", in *The World in 2007*, p. 1-11, http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/democracy_index_2007_v3.pdf.

⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2014*, January 2015, p. 27, <http://www.sudestada.com.uy/Content/Articles/421a313a-d58f-462e-9b24-2504a37f6b56/Democracy-index-2014.pdf>.

⁶ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January 1994), p. 55-69.

⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

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such names as caesarism, bonapartism, *caudillismo*, populism, and the like.⁹ So what then are these characteristics and do they accurately describe "Sisi-ism"?

The primary features of delegative authoritarianism are those of its key figure, the president, who, as O'Donnell notes, is "the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests." Because the body politic is in disarray, the "delegative" president has the right and the duty to administer "unpleasant medicines that will restore the health of the nation."¹⁰ This description seems apt when applied to Sisi, who shortly before assuming the presidency stated in a TV interview: "I'm not leaving a chance for people to act on their own. My program will be mandatory."¹¹ In a leaked conversation during the election campaign he asked the rhetorical questions "You want to be a first-class nation? Will you bear it if I make you walk on your own feet? When I wake you up at 5 in the morning every day?"¹² In another leaked recording from December 2013, he stated about himself and the military that we are "like the very big brother, the very big father who has a son who is a bit of a failure and does not understand the facts. Does the father kill the son? Or does he always shelter him and say, 'I'll be patient until my son understands'?"¹³ By "son" he clearly meant the Egyptian nation, which these quotes suggest he views as soft and weak, in need of his firm guiding hand and the stiff medicine he intends to prescribe. During his campaign Sisi promised to improve public morals, among other things by "presenting God" correctly, and by taking "legal action against personal insults."¹⁴ His lofty self-image, suffused with religion and associated with his duty to lead the nation, were reflected in the December 2013 leaked interview in which he declared: "I have a long history with visions. For example, I once saw myself carrying a sword with 'No God but Allah' engraved on it in red... In another, I saw President Sadat, and he told me that he knew he would be President of Egypt, so I responded that I know I will be President too."¹⁵ In sum, Sisi's utterances suggest he is the very embodiment of the delegative authoritarian, conflating the nation with himself while arrogating to himself the role of doctor to cure the ills he has diagnosed. And indeed, when speaking in Germany to Egyptian expatriates in June 2015 he claimed that "God made me a doctor to diagnose the problem, he made me like this so I could see and understand the true state of affairs. It's a blessing from God."¹⁶

⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

¹¹ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egypt's New Strongman, Sisi Knows Best", in *The New York Times*, 24 May 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1ogMVA>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karl Vick, "Egypt's al-Sisi: The Field Marshal Who Could be Pharaoh", in *Time*, 27 January 2014, <http://ti.me/1mP867l>.

¹⁶ Alex Wright, "Sisi Declares Himself Egypt's God-Send", in *al-Araby*, 8 June 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2015/6/8/sisi-declares-himself-egypts-god-send>.

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2. Sisi's prescriptions

How then does he propose to restore the health of the nation? Consistent with O'Donnell's delegative prototype, he provided few specifics in his campaign, but asserted it is his business alone – that is, the doctor knows best. To start with, according to O'Donnell, "policies of his government need bear no resemblance to the promises of his campaign – has not the president been authorized to govern as he (or she) thinks best?"¹⁷ Urged by his campaign advisors to declare some specific economic and foreign policies, Sisi avoided doing so for most of the campaign. One exception was his commitment relatively early in that campaign to invest 40 billion dollars in "social housing," a campaign promise that had enormous appeal among Egypt's poor.¹⁸ In the event, more than two years later no such housing had been built or even commenced. As president, Sisi made no further reference to the plan, leaving it to his subordinates to accuse the Emirati partner, Muhammad Alabbar, of reneging on a deal that apparently underpinned the project. Several days before the election Sisi appeared to respond to mounting criticism of the lack of any specific planks in his platform by declaring a colour-coded "Map of the Future," which he claimed would guide his administration and "achieve unprecedented rates of development and effect a quantum leap in the Egyptian economy."¹⁹ The map called for construction in the desert of forty-eight new cities, eight new airports, fish farms and renewable energy projects to generate 10,000 Megawatts of power, with a total cost of 140 billion dollars, of which 120 billion would be provided by Egyptians living abroad, according to the presidential candidate. As it transpired, a far smaller version of the map had been presented by its designer, Faruq al Baz, to President Mubarak in 1985, who rejected it as too costly and unworkable. Apparently lacking any other clear plan to present to the electorate, Sisi dusted this one off, multiplied the figures and claimed it as his own.²⁰ This pledge sank into even deeper oblivion after the election than that to build one million social housing units.

Lacking specific, viable, positive policy proposals, the Sisi campaign and his subsequent behaviour as president essentially conveyed a negative message, identifying what would not be done, rather than what would be. As already mentioned, he desisted from associating himself and his regime from any political party, thus exemplifying O'Donnell's "paternal figure" having to "take care of the whole nation" and so avoid "the factionalism and conflicts associated with parties."²¹ Moreover, "resistance – be it from congress, political parties, interest groups, or crowds in the streets – has to be ignored." According to O'Donnell, "The President isolates himself from most political institutions and organized interests,

¹⁷ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy", cit., p. 60.

¹⁸ Tom Rollins, "Egypt's Poor Expect Sisi to Deliver on Election Promises", in *Al-Monitor*, 3 June 2014, <http://almon.co/23lr>.

¹⁹ Stephen Kalin, "Sisi's Economic Vision for Egypt: Back to the Future", in *Reuters*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/22/us-egypt-sisi-economy-idUSBREA4L0KL20140522>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy", cit., p. 60.

and bears sole responsibility for the successes and failures of 'his' policies."²² And indeed, Sisi has consistently denigrated (even as terrorism), any resistance to his initiatives, for which he has sought no organised support. Major policy initiatives, such as reduction of energy subsidies, importation of gas from Israel, imposition of capital gains taxes on share transactions, prohibition of importation of short staple cotton, and in many cases their abrupt modification or cancellation, are suddenly announced, typically by relatively low-ranking officials, thereby implying their presidential origin. Governing without a parliament, hence in violation of the constitution drafted under his guidance, Sisi has ruled by presidential decree. Never has the president or his spokesperson offered an explanation of the reasoning behind a decree, those involved in its formulation, the time period in which it is to be effected, or any other information that would suggest engagement between the presidency and various constituencies impacted by those decrees, to say nothing of the institutional context in which the decree was formulated. What is offered instead is consistent with O'Donnell's description of a delegative regime as one in which "only the head really knows: the president and his most trusted advisors are the alpha and the omega of politics." The nation's problems "can only be solved by highly technical criteria," which are understood only by "*técnicos*" recruited and shielded by the president.²³ The Sisi regime is just such an anonymous, apolitical one, in that the identities of his close advisors remain unknown while inputs from public political actors, who do not have access to channels of participation, are rare to non-existent. In sum, Sisi's Egypt appears to be an authoritarian version of O'Donnell's delegative democracy, in that it manifests key characteristics of the type, except that Egyptian voters probably do not have the power to remove their president through the ballot box, were they to want to do so. Since O'Donnell has also described the internal dynamics of such regimes, we can draw upon his analysis in an effort to shed some light on how Sisi's operates and where it might be headed.

3. Regime dynamics

Unlike representative democracies, where decision-making is slow and incremental because policies are made and carried out by relatively autonomous institutions, delegative systems have the "apparent advantage of allowing swift policy making [...] we witness a decision-making frenzy, what in Latin America we call *decretismo*."²⁴ The drumbeat of announcements of major policy initiatives under President Sisi is a case in point. Following his election Sisi announced a string of bold new initiatives, including reclamation of a minimum of one million acres of agricultural land (thereby adding almost 20 percent to the existing total), construction of a large-scale nuclear power plant along the northwest Mediterranean coast, building at an estimated cost of 45 billion dollars an entirely

²² Ibid., p. 61.

²³ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

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new Cairo between the existing city and the Suez Canal, and the transformation of the Suez Canal Zone into a major transport, logistical and manufacturing centre. These proposed projects were entirely fanciful or of marginal utility, either for technical (e.g., insufficient water for further land reclamation) or financial reasons. The only proposal acted upon was a portion of the larger Suez Canal Zone project, with the military taking charge of digging a parallel canal "in less than one year." But this project unfortunately illustrates another of the characteristics of delegative authoritarianism identified by O'Donnell, which is that the apparent advantage of swift policymaking comes "at the expense of a higher likelihood of gross mistakes, of hazardous implementation, and of concentrating responsibility for the outcomes on the president."²⁵ Undertaken without feasibility or cost/benefit analyses, digging the second Suez Canal has been plagued with technical problems, sucked more than 8 billion dollars of deposits out of the banking system and into the hands of the military in the form of "Suez Canal Certificates" paying 12 percent interest, and has virtually no prospect of increasing canal revenues by more than 4 percent annually or substantially raising ship traffic for at least five years.²⁶

The dynamics of *decretismo* identified by O'Donnell suggest challenges that lie ahead for Sisi. "Because such hasty, unilateral executive orders are likely to offend important and politically mobilized interests, they are unlikely to be implemented."²⁷ Moreover, because delegative systems tend to arise in economic crises which have slowed if not altogether halted democratic transitions, policy stasis resulting from the political and institutional isolation of the president is intensified by the need to reconcile competing class interests. Most notably, delegative authoritarians must "both control inflation and implement social policies which show that [...] they do care about the fate of the poor and [...] the middle class." This, however, is "a very tall order," because "[t]hese two goals are extremely difficult to harmonize."²⁸ The fate of Sisi's decrees exemplifies these constraints and challenges. Virtually all the high profile, pie-in-the-sky projects have stalled and presumably been abandoned, suggesting their whimsical, *decretismo* nature. But yet more importantly, the everyday management of the economy has also fallen into disarray, mainly because of socioeconomic structural constraints. A promised second round of reductions of energy subsidies, for example, was cancelled without explanation, undoubtedly because of fear of backlash from poor consumers. Fiscal policies have zigged and zagged with taxes, such as those on equities and property, being declared and then rescinded, again because of a hostile reception, in this case primarily by the middle class. The 2015-16 budget was declared, but a few days later disavowed by Sisi himself,

²⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁶ "Leaks Halt Construction at Suez Canal Project", in *Ahram Online*, 19 January 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/120670.aspx>. For an analysis of the projected rate of return on the investment and indictment of the lack of feasibility studies, see Hisham Khalil, "Is the New Suez Canal a Priority at this Time?", in *Egypt Independent*, 2 July 2015, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/new-suez-canal-priority-time>. See also Ayah Aman, "Questions Remain on Egypt's Suez Canal Project", in *Al-Monitor*, 26 August 2014, <http://almon.co/26kk>.

²⁷ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy", cit., p. 66-67.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

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who ordered a second budget to be produced that reduced the budget's projected deficit as a percentage of GDP by at least 1 percent while raising the anticipated growth rate. The technocrats duly complied, simply increasing anticipated revenues by the ordered amount, without any accompanying explanation of how revenues from the new VAT consumption tax would increase by some 50 percent as the economy stagnates.²⁹ Presumably the president's fear of resulting inflation and its impact on the poor, who if measured by incomes of 2 dollars per day or less now constitute more than 40 percent of the population, was the chief motivation for the abrupt change. Even civil service salaries have been adjusted up and down as the regime tries to balance its need to retain the loyalty of this huge sector with its fear of inflation rising above its chronic 10-13 percent, a rate already hard to prevent from rising further as the currency depreciates. Similarly, caps placed on high-flying civil servant emoluments were declared, objected to and then quietly forgotten. Not anchored in any class or constituency, the regime floats above them all, desperately trying to appease the poor and middle class, and indeed, even the wealthy, but not really knowing how to do so given the limited resources available.

The consequences of erratic, inconsistent and ineffective president-centred policymaking are, according to O'Donnell, to further accentuate the magnitude of policy swings and their hasty declaration, to isolate the president yet more from institutions and political forces, and to cause the entire polity to be suffused with a deep cynicism. "By promising expansionist economic policies and many other good things to come with them, only to enact severe stabilization packages immediately or shortly after entering office [...] does nothing to promote public trust, particularly if their immediate and most visible impact further depresses the already low standard of living of most of the population."³⁰ Despite the Sisi regime's imposition of ever more Draconian censorship and outright intimidation of journalists, politicians and activists of almost any description, the population is increasingly distrustful of the system and alienated from it, even if Sisi himself remains popular. Widespread ridicule of the grandiose plans that come to nothing and of the crumbling institutions of state, including the judiciary; petty squabbling among what is left of the political class that lives under the regime's umbrella; and lack of any strong, popular push to try to repair the situation, say by demanding the reinstatement of a parliament – all these are signs of growing cynical detachment from politics.

How then, in sum, does Sisi's delegative dictatorship differ from Mubarak's hybrid, softer style of authoritarian rule? Stylistically they are dramatically different, with the former's being inspirational in nature, the latter's managerial. Sisi is the doctor who knows best, prescribing all major policy initiatives. Mubarak, by

²⁹ Amira Salah-Ahmed, "Amr Adly: State's Target of Lower Deficit is Unrealistic", in *Mada Masr*, 9 July 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/node/19761>. See also Ziad Bahaa-Eldin, "Egypt: Understanding the New Budget", in *Ahram Online*, 15 July 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/135476.aspx>.

³⁰ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy", cit., p. 66.

contrast, was reluctant to be identified with major undertakings of any sort, hiding behind a bevy of advisors and institutions, clearly intending to make it easy to disassociate himself from policies that failed conspicuously. The content of their policies has also differed. Sisi is a high-stakes gambler, while Mubarak played the odds cautiously. Whereas Mubarak essentially avoided confrontations in the Sinai, Sisi has thrown his troops into a major counterinsurgency campaign there, even deploying F-16 aircraft to bomb his own citizens, an action which Mubarak would have been unlikely to countenance. Other than the Tushka project in the southwestern desert, Mubarak did not push any high-profile initiatives. In his first two years in office Sisi has launched a half dozen or so such undertakings with a total price tag in the hundreds of billions. Mubarak was content to remain under the American umbrella, whereas Sisi has reached out to Russia and even the Chinese to provide counterbalances to Uncle Sam. Most importantly, Mubarak sought to clothe his regime with civilian legitimacy, playing the puppeteer to state institutions, political organisations, NGOs and politicians and public figures, pulling them up and pushing them down in order to keep the political drama going and thereby provide some distractions from his personal rule and scapegoats for failures. Sisi has felt no such need, and so has created no insulation between himself and the population. Indeed, his appeal is directly to the masses, circumventing institutions and political actors. Ultimately Mubarak's careful balancing act tipped over, but that was thirty years after he inherited power and the regime over which he presided outlived him, indeed became the base upon which his successor built his power. Sisi is unlikely to rule for anything like that period and will have little if any political legacy to bequeath, either personal or institutional.

4. The future of Sisi's delegative system

According to O'Donnell, this progressive degeneration of delegative systems should "naturally" be terminated by coups d'état, but typically are not. Indeed, in Latin America he notes that these systems demonstrate a "remarkable capacity for endurance," where, with the partial exception of Peru, no coups have taken place.³¹ He explains this paradox with reference to assistance provided by the international system, which seeks to prevent breakdown and disorder even at the cost of sustaining one-man rule, and to some sectors of the population being willing to continue to indulge the delegative president. The only cases in which such systems are put back on the path to democracy are those which were previously democratic, those being Uruguay and Chile in his Latin American sample. In those countries institutions gradually came back to life and asserted themselves against the delegative president. But where there is little legacy of effective institutions, "the arduous task of institutionalization" is rendered yet more difficult, if not altogether impossible, by the economic crisis.³² So states with little democratic

³¹ Ibid., p. 67.

³² Ibid., p. 68.

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heritage stumble on under ineffective presidents from whom populations become ever more estranged, if nevertheless still accepting.

But is Egypt's delegative authoritarianism likely to follow the Latin American trajectory? Although the international system is trying to keep Sisi's regime afloat and the unhappy population does not seem to be going over to quasi-insurgency en masse or even identifying personal or institutional alternatives to Sisi, the Latin American scenario of persisting delegative authoritarianism is not the only plausible one. Indeed, the logical alternative identified by O'Donnell of a *coup d'état* seems not only theoretically possible but supported by some empirical straws in the wind. Sisi is strongly identified with the hardline faction within the military and security services, thus opening up space for a challenger claiming to offer a moderate alternative, especially with regard to relations with Islamists, including insurgents. There could be considerable external support for a move from this quarter, including from Saudi Arabia and even the US. The former is presently working behind the scenes to reconcile Sisi with the Muslim Brotherhood. His rebuff of that effort is presumably the chief cause of a reduction of Saudi aid to Egypt. The house arrest of former chief of staff Sami Abul Enan; the banning from Egypt of former presidential contender and air force general Ahmad Shafiq; rapid turnover rates in key military and intelligence positions, including those of head of the second and third armies, General Intelligence and Minister of Interior; and the marginalizing of the present chief of staff, Sidqy Subhi, who did not accompany Sisi on his visit to the troops in Sinai following the dramatic 1 July 2015 attack on them by insurgents – all these are indicators of tension in the highest ranks. Failures thus far to contain the insurgency or put the economy on anything resembling a sound footing, combined with Sisi's ever more egocentric rule, render him increasingly vulnerable to disenchanted competitors in key military command positions.

There are at least another couple of options that lie outside the Latin American experience. One would be a rerun of the "coup-volution" of 2011. In this scenario widespread demonstrations would again cause the military to step in to "save the nation," then partner at least temporarily with one or more of the major civilian political forces, possibly even including the Brotherhood yet again. While this would be history repeating itself as farce, as Marx observed with regard to Louise-Napoleon Bonaparte's 1851 coup, given the balance of power between the deep state and any and all combinations of civilian political forces, which presently precludes the latter from overwhelming the former, it is at least a possible historical farce. At the other end of the spectrum are the real revolutions, made possible by systemic breakdown, possibly coupled with the rise of a coherent radical Islamist challenger, maybe even the present Islamic State headquartered in Raqqa, Syria, and claiming the allegiance of the most powerful component of the present Egyptian insurgency. Given the degree of socioeconomic decay since 2011, the abject failure of the civilian political class in the face of Sisi and the military, and tumult in the region combined with neutralisation of external actors, most importantly the US, the prospects for a countrywide breakdown of order in the face of a mass upheaval continue to grow. This would not be history repeating as farce because this upheaval would be that of the *sans culottes*, or in the Egyptian context, those wearing the *galabiyya*, not

the Westernised, middle-class liberals who orchestrated events in 2011. Such an uprising could throw up its own leadership, or it could provide the opportunity for existing radical Islamist organisations to try to ride that tiger. That such outcomes are even imaginable is suggestive of the magnitude of political and economic decay from which Egypt suffers. But that they are imaginable does not mean they are probable. Indeed, at least for the foreseeable future, Sisi continuing as the delegative dictator seems the most likely scenario. As a one-man band though it is inherently unstable, as implied by constant discussion of a possible assassination accompanied with Sisi's profoundly reclusive habits dictated by security concerns. While another Sisi could emerge were the present one to succumb, the combination of deteriorating circumstances with the challenges of reprising a previously failed act and regenerating something like charisma suggest that delegative dictatorship will probably not outlive Sisi.

5. What is to be done?

Given the inherent fragility of Sisi's hard but brittle authoritarianism, which is probably as likely to collapse as to reform from within, what should states supportive of Egypt do? Unqualified, fulsome support for the regime will do little if anything to stabilise it so long as its "delegative" nature remains unchanged, a malignant nature that would be reinforced by such support. Abandoning the regime while it faces a significant threat from violent extremists risks encouraging those extremists in Egypt and elsewhere. A middle path of qualified support seems preferable, but such a path is difficult to chart.

To have a chance of success it has to target two goals that seem to lie in different directions – helping to counter the insurgency while broadening and deepening support for a responsive, inclusive government. The former objective necessitates, among other things, enhancing the state's capacities, including coercive ones, to counter the insurgency. The latter objective demands assistance and indeed pressure to prize the regime open while rebuilding institutions and engendering respect for the rule of law and human rights and, most of all, assisting the process of reconciliation between competing political forces as part of a broader process of rebuilding what is presently a much fragmented political community. These are tall orders for which the necessary if not sufficient condition for success is a central theme to guide assistance efforts and to make clear to all, including President Sisi, what their intent is.

The one theme that might reconcile the competing objectives and have some chance of success in achieving both is the assertion of civilian control over the state's means of coercion and, most especially, its military. Egypt has suffered under military dominated governments since it became a republic in 1952 and it is such government that underpins Sisi's delegative authoritarianism. Asserting civilian control over the security sector as a whole is a theme around which disparate civilian political actors and even elements of the coercive forces could

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unite. Enhancing that control could in turn serve to build a more stable base for government, while also upgrading its abilities to deter violent extremism. The ways and means of assisting the process of developing civilian control of the armed forces are reasonably well known, having been employed in much of Latin America, Asia and Africa, although not in the Middle East, the region which has suffered the most from militarism of all sorts. Egypt would be an ideal setting to exemplify for the region as a whole how civilian control of the armed forces can render government more effective in the discharge of its duties, including providing security for its people, something which delegative authoritarianism, however much it is beefed up by outside support, will never accomplish.

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