



Pharaoh Al-Sisi Takes Control In Egypt: Obama Administration Sacrifices Security, Human Rights, And Democracy

By Doug Bandow

January 20, 2014

A new pharaoh is rising in Egypt. Gen. Abdel Fata al-Sisi is preparing to grasp supreme power, most likely as the country's next president. He is posing as democracy's savior while his troops are detaining or killing those who oppose him. The arrests and shootings continued during last week's constitutional referendum.

After some time out of the news, Egypt has reemerged as perhaps the administration's greatest foreign policy failure. Washington has proved impotent in the face of political revolution, Islamist activism, and military repression. Terrorism is accelerating, and Egypt is likely to end up without stability, liberty, democracy, or prosperity. America should disengage from a crisis which it helped create but has no ability to resolve.

During the Cold War the U.S. stole Cairo away from the Soviet Union and buried the Egyptian government in cash, enriching political and military elites while the population suffered under authoritarian political and dirigiste economic policies. When revolution loomed in 2011 the administration endorsed Hosni Mubarak, before trying to work with newly elected President Mohamed Morsi, of the long repressed Muslim Brotherhood. Whatever his desire, Morsi lacked control of the army, police, judiciary, and bureaucracy, and thus had no opportunity to create an authoritarian Islamic state. He failed to expand his popular appeal and discredited his movement, making the Brotherhood's defeat almost certain in the next poll.

However, Gen. Sisi and his confederates were in a hurry to seize power. The police faded from the streets, inviting chaos. Business elites created artificial shortages. And the general encouraged demonstrations to justify military intervention. He then staged a coup and cemented his personal control.

Gen. Sisi looked to Joseph Stalin for guidance, initiating a show trial of Morsi. One charge was incitement to murder because the Brotherhood sought to protect the presidential palace from protestors—after the police refused to defend the building. The regime also contended that the former president had insulted the Mubarak-dominated judiciary. Last month Morsi was charged with having

escaped from prison even as protestors were overthrowing the Mubarak dictatorship. Morsi also was cited for having “opened channels of communication with the West via Turkey and Qatar.”

Morsi’s supporters are paying an even higher price than Morsi as Gen. Sisi’s forces arrest and shoot those who refuse to genuflect to the new pharaoh. Although the Brotherhood was not without blame, the military chose repression over reconciliation. Gen. Sisi killed hundreds or more in the August crackdown in Cairo—probably more than the number killed in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Since then thousands more have died and been arrested.

The putative pharaoh has been actively restoring the Ancien Regime. Gen. Sisi has tapped military officers as provincial gauleiters, recreated Mubarak’s secret and intelligence police, reinstated military trials, enacted strict new restrictions on demonstrations, arrested journalists, deployed private thugs against Morsi supporters and regime critics, and prosecuted protestors. McClatchy’s Amina Ismail and Nancy Youssef reported: “Egyptians caught in the roundup have told McClatchy they were tortured while awaiting charges. Islamist leaders claim that the government is rounding up family members in the night as leverage against them. Lawyers tasked with representing arrested Morsi supporters often are arrested when they go to be with their clients during prison interrogations.”

In November 21 women were sentenced to up to 11 years in prison for protesting Morsi’s trial. Seven were under 18 years old. After widespread public outrage, they were freed on appeal. But the same month the “democratic” interim government issued new regulations banning at the regime’s discretion almost any demonstration.

Last month three democracy activists involved in the 2011 revolution were sentenced to three years each in prison for violating the repressive new rules. Ahmed al-Maher, one of the three, told his countrymen: “Torture in police stations remains, while the Ministry of Interior is back to what it was. The protest law was passed, and the oppression of freedoms is back. Now the youth of the revolution are in prison.”

On Sunday a prosecutor charged political scientist Amr Hamzawy with insulting the judiciary. In June the latter tweeted a criticism a court ruling against three American non-governmental organizations. The military apparently is determined to exterminate any hint of dissent. Samer Shehata of the University of Oklahoma told the *New York Times*: “Anyone who would question the current rulers is subject to this kind of persecution.”

The press has been a special military target. Observed the *Washington Post*: “A once-diverse press has swung into line behind the government, parroting its far-fetched claims about opponents.” The regime closed four television stations for allegedly sympathizing with the Brotherhood. Comedian Bassem Youssef’s television show was banned after he targeted the general.

Newscaster Shahira Amin, dismissed from her position for “implying” the coup was a coup, told the *Wall Street Journal* that “now is the worst ever.” She added: “It’s more Mubarak policies, but more dangerous for journalists.” In December the Committee to Protect Journalists said Egypt had become the world’s ninth most prolific jailer of journalists. The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association cited a “worsening climate for free speech and peaceable assembly.”

Overall, human rights activists say the situation is worse than under Mubarak. Bahey al-Din Hassan, head of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, told the *Journal*, "It is more horrible than the old regime." Gamel al-Eid of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information argued that the military was sending pro-democracy activists a message: "It is time to shut up, to stay quiet. There is only one choice—to support the military or to be in jail."

Nor does the new constitution matter. The document maintains the military's privileged status and protects repressive state institutions from outside control. Approval was never in doubt: the regime arrested opponents of the new charter and controlled the vote count.

However, military rule is about more than politics. Today the Egyptian armed forces are an economically exploitative class, managing as much as 40 percent of the economy. Officers operate as a caste, with sons following fathers into service. Robert Springborg of the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School told NPR the officers are collecting "billions and billions and billions" and are "focused on consumption."

Gen. Sisi has begun to toss unnecessary allies overboard. For instance, when some of the liberal coup supporters began protesting against his policies, the general arrested them. The regime even called them Islamists or terrorists. Coptic Christians were long persecuted by the Mubarak regime and the army, yet Coptic Pope Tawadros II publicly endorsed the coup. It didn't help. When Islamists retaliated by attacking Copts, the military did little to protect them. Today Gen. Sisi is more interested in appealing to Islamists to draw them away from the Brotherhood.

The regime's overriding objective is to destroy the group. Cairo has banned the "terrorist" organization and made it a crime to participate in Brotherhood activities or promote the group "by speech, writing or any other means."

However, the Brotherhood withstood decades of repression by previous dictators and joined the political process strong enough to win Egypt's first legislative and presidential elections. My Cato Institute colleague Dalibor Rohac warned that past prohibitions—at one point membership was a capital offense—"strengthened the organization's narrative of victim hood and enabled it to reemerge strengthened and relying on broader popular support."

Moreover, by confirming the extremist critique that democracy is a fool's errand, Gen. Sisi has left opponents of his incipient dictatorship little choice but to use violence. Although the organization's leadership denounced recent bombings, government repression likely will further fragment the leadership and encourage radicalism. Moving to violence "will be small extremist groups and cells, which probably are only now gelling and will be led by organizers who point to Egypt's history over the past year as demonstrating that the Brotherhood's commitment to peaceful political competition is foolish and ineffective," argued former diplomat Paul Pillar.

In fact, Mubarak's crackdown on the Brotherhood four decades ago sparked the formation of new radical groups, including al-Qaeda. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, both formerly with the State Department, explained: "Repression of Islamists in Egypt was an essential stage in the emergence of contemporary jihadism. As splinter groups that were significantly more radical than the Muslim Brotherhood formed, Islamists became more violent." The result was radical groups leading up to al-Qaeda. Indeed, before joining al-Qaeda current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was tortured by the Mubarak regime.

Violent opposition to the Sisi's incipient dictatorship is rising. Traditionally the security forces faced little resistance. However, more than 150 policemen were killed between August and December. Bombings are increasing in frequency. Worse for America, warned Max Boot: "as long as Washington is seen on the side of the generals, some of their violence will be directed our way."

Egypt's stability could be at risk. The London risk consultancy firm Maplecroft warned: "the impact [of violence] this time is likely to be far worse [than in the past], given wider turmoil in the country and the proliferation of weapons." Even modest unrest and sporadic terrorism would discourage investors and tourists. If Egypt slides toward the sort of civil war which consumed Algeria during the 1990s, the human and economic cost would be incalculable.

However, the Obama administration still refuses to call a coup a coup. It eventually, though reluctantly, withheld portions of the \$1.55 billion in annual foreign aid, while assuring Cairo that doing so was not "punitive." Then the administration pushed to relax aid conditions.

But most of the roughly \$75 billion given to Cairo over the years enriched political and military elites and funded the purchase of prestige weapons from American arms makers. The U.S. never received much "leverage" in return. The knowledge that the Egyptian military would cease to exist after a war with Israel kept the peace. Cairo never could afford to close the Suez Canal. The regime could drop preferences currently accorded the Pentagon, but the Egyptian military needs the U.S. more than the U.S. needs the Egyptian military. Washington could respond by cutting off spare parts or maintenance contracts.

Anyway, the U.S. had no credibility to enforce conditions since it never was willing to stop the money. The administration finally (kind of) did so last fall, but if America runs back to Cairo, cash-in-hand, the former will never again have the slightest hint of leverage. Moreover, the regime now is flooded with money from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and doesn't need American assistance.

Andrew Cordesman advocated "refocusing U.S. aid to slowly push Egypt's military toward compromise and restraint, building up Egypt's more secular and liberal forces, and making it clear that the U.S. supports the role of Egypt's moderate Islamists." However, Washington failed to achieve these ends before despite decades of trying. The secular and liberal forces are a political nullity. The military doesn't need America's money and won't let U.S. pressure get in the way of regime preservation.

Sam Holliday of the Armiger Cromwell Center argued that the U.S. should push the Egyptian military "to focus on effective ways to achieve stability within Egypt, rather than relying on suppression tactics and retention of centralized power." However, military control is based on centralized power and Gen. Sisi has demonstrated no interest in sharing authority. Armiger also suggested that Washington "encourage the Egyptian military to form a coalition with business, the judiciary, young liberals, and those Muslims who oppose the Third Jihad." But the military doesn't need them.

Others who support aiding the Egyptian government do so for delusional or even blood-thirsty reasons. Rep. Michele Bachmann incongruously blamed the Brotherhood for 9/11. Rep. Louie Gohmert compared blood-drenched Gen. Sisi to both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. After the Egyptian military's slaughter of unarmed men, women, and children, columnist Kurt Schlichter wrote: "I just can't work up a lot of caring because a pack of murderous subversives whose declared goal is

returning the globe to a permanent state of Seventh Century Bedouin theocracy tried to fight it out with a tough, well-armed and patriotic Egyptian military and got their teeth kicked in.”

Conservative columnist Lucius Madaurus contended that the Brotherhood, which peacefully participated in Egypt’s *first free elections in history*, “is a terrorist organization that opposes the idea of Western-style democratic government in Egypt.” While endorsing killing by Egypt’s military, he advocated “selling Western ideas of personal liberty and democracy in the Muslim world.” Since the Persian Gulf’s corrupt, repressive, and Islamist monarchies “would prefer a return of dynastic rule in Egypt,” *USA Today* columnist DeWayne Wickham contended: “The Obama administration and Congress should do the same.”

Jeff Moore of Muir Analytics talked of “massacres,” as if the cold-blooded sniping of civilians was not a massacre. He seemed upset that decades ago the Brotherhood tried to assassinate Abdel Gamel al-Nasser, a left-wing dictator who allied Egypt with the Soviet Union and battled Israel. Moore complained that “Egypt’s domestic war is on, yet again,” but ignored the fact that the military fired first.

Some advocates are more practical. Argued John Bolton, “Today’s struggle is ultimately between the Brotherhood and the army. Like it or not, it is time for the U.S. to choose sides.” The *Journal’s* Bret Stephens similarly contended that “Politics in Egypt today is a zero-sum game: Either the military wins, or the Brotherhood does. If the U.S. wants influence, it needs to hold its nose and take a side.”

Yet for decades Washington has taken sides and gained little benefit. Irrespective of Washington’s financial or rhetorical support, Gen. Sisi is likely to take America’s preferred positions out of his country’s own interest. More important, underwriting a murderous regime inevitably stains the hands of American policymakers. Who can believe Washington’s bleating about human rights any where when it is actively funding a grotesquely repressive regime in Egypt?

The administration should disengage from Egyptian politics. There is no reason to support either side. Explained Charles Dunne of Freedom House: “It is a matter of standing up for American principles and applying them to America’s own foreign policy.”

Washington should stop underwriting repression and killing. The U.S. should demonstrate to Egyptians that it does not believe America’s interests, however defined, warrant wantonly sacrificing their lives, liberty, and dignity. Although Gen. Sisi is widely supported today, his popularity has declined. Growing repression and declining prosperity likely will ultimately make him very unpopular, like Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf. Washington stepping back would send an equally important message to people elsewhere in the world, who see the U.S. repeatedly back corrupt dictators in the name of stability.

Former Reagan official Daniel Oliver declared: “however great the interest of the Egyptian people in their own freedom and human rights, it is eclipsed, even if they don’t realize it, by the national security interest of the United States.” However, promoting U.S. security cannot justify underwriting the slaughter of innocents. And underwriting the slaughter of innocents will ultimately have disastrous consequences for U.S. security.

It’s time for America to exit the Egyptian imbroglio. Washington is far more likely to make the chaos along the Nile worse than better.

