Sisi's moment

The new Egyptian leader will need to be able to point to achievements in the security and economic realms to avoid a renewal of social and political protests

IT'S OFFICIAL: Ex-field marshal, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's de facto leader since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi from power in July 2013, has been elected president.

Chosen by almost 97 percent of the approximately 25 million Egyptians who, according to official figures, went to the polls May 25-27, he defeated the only other candidate, Hamdeen Sabahi. The entire process was more of a confirmatory referendum than a genuinely competitive election in which Western standards of election-campaign fairness did not apply.

ASMAA WAGUIH / REUTERS

Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi supporters on their way to vote, Cairo, May 28

Much of the focus leading up to the election was on the degree of voter turnout. Backed by a sycophantic media and orchestrated personality cult campaign, which explicitly linked Sisi to iconic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sisi had exhorted Egyptians to come out in droves, hoping for an 80 percent turnout (52 percent had voted in the election that brought Morsi to power). For Sisi, such a massive turnout would give his election an undeniable stamp of legitimacy.

He and his political allies were to be disappointed. With the numbers still below par at the end of the second and final day, voting was extended for a third day, enabling the authorities to claim a turnout of 47.45 percent, which was roughly in line with the previous elections. Most likely, the actual turnout rate was significantly lower.

Why? Certainly, exhaustion was a factor. This was the seventh time Egyptians had been called to the polls since Hosni Mubarak's overthrow three years ago, and the fact that the election wasn't genuinely competitive undoubtedly lowered voter motivation. But there was clearly much more involved.

According to George Washington University Prof. Bill Lawrence, who observed 47 different polling stations for Democracy International (one of the international NGOs invited to monitor the election proceedings), most of those who did show up to vote were of the older generation (age 40 and up), while 18-30 year-olds clearly stayed home. More generally, anecdotal evidence showed that dissatisfaction with the authorities wasn't limited to Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers.

A poll taken just 10 days before the election by the reputable Pew Research Center confirms Lawrence's observation that the populace is both unhappy with the state of the country and deeply divided over who should be leading it. Seventy-two percent expressed their dissatisfaction with the direction the country had taken, while only 24 percent declared that they were satisfied.

These results were strikingly similar to a poll taken in spring 2010, nine months before the Tahrir Square uprising that toppled Mubarak. The Brotherhood's approval rating had declined sharply to 38 percent, but that is nonetheless a substantial figure considering the authorities' unrelenting campaign against what is now officially defined as a terrorist organization. Moreover, 43 percent stated that they were opposed to Morsi having been ousted from power, while 54 percent supported it. The same percentage held a favorable view of Sisi, while 45 percent did not.

What's next? Sisi clearly has considerable support in the country. This is made up of the military, business and bureaucratic elites, which underpin Egypt's "deep state," the Copt minority (about 10 percent of the population), which deeply fears the Islamists, and many ordinary middle-aged and older people who yearn for stability, security and a sense of normalcy after three years of post-revolutionary upheaval.

In the region, the anti-Brotherhood Gulf Arab states – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait – have streamed as much as $20 billion into Sisi's coffers to stave off economic collapse and, according to Barclay's Research, are preparing to do so again. Thousands of Brotherhood members and sympathizers and the entire leadership are incarcerated with the state showing no interest in dialogue of any kind. State repression also has extended to liberal critics of the regime.

Egypt's articulate and politically conscious youth, who played crucial roles in undermining both Mubarak and Morsi, and who suffer from high unemployment and frustration over the revolution's unmet expectations, have not disappeared but, for the time being, are likely to be quiescent. Upcoming parliamentary elections most likely will complete Sisi's institutional consolidation of power.

What will he do with it? No one expects economic miracles – Egypt's problems are too deep-seated to be amenable to quick fixes. But, in the coming months, he will need to be able to point to interim achievements in both the security and economic realms to avoid a renewal of social and political protests. He already has invoked the Nasserist legacy of greater state involvement in the economy as a counter to the crony capitalism that characterized the Mubarak era. In the same vein, he wants to direct more of the state's massive food and fuel subsidies to those who really need it.

And, in emphasizing Egypt's role in fighting terrorism, particularly in Sinai, he has reaffirmed openly the strategic necessity of maintaining Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and a desire for Western understanding and support. Attaining it will reinforce his position at home, even as he also will want to show that he is not acting according to Western diktats. ■

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