



Egypt's Military Governments as a Tool for Regime Security and Its Impact on Economic Stability

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Abstract - Egyptian military has successfully shaped the transition process and strengthened its role following Mubarak ousting. Therefore, whoever the president is, Egypt will rely heavily on the military response in every political and economic policy. For President Sisi, he needs military endorsement to remain in power safely amidst the regime's vulnerability to internal threats due to the regime's lack of public support and high repressive actions. The paper finds that internal threats to Sisi's regime entail influential actors or groups of opposition (Moslem Brotherhood) and rebellion (*Takfiri*) groups in north Sinai. To deal with the threats, Sisi's military government takes high repressive actions to opposition figures, cuts off the supply of basic needs and imposes strict checkpoints to rebels-held areas in Sinai. Sisi's regime security strategies negatively affect democratization process. However, it does not mean that democracy consolidation in Egypt has failed. A state, in some cases, needs to go through more than three election cycles to consolidate democracies. Under a military government with a high level of repression, the Egyptian economy is growing steadily and achieves stability, especially in Sisi's second presidential term.

Keywords: military, Regime Security, Economic Stability

I. INTRODUCTION

Egypt underwent a political structure shift after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. However, the tension of Egypt's politics rose again and led the state to return to the status quo. The military tried to regain its political power alongside with liberals and secular groups, who were disappointed with the MB government, to overthrow Mohammad Morsi from power. Eventually, the military led the coup in July 2013, which then rose the military figure and the then Minister of Defense, General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, to power (Ar dovini & Mabon, 2019; Hassan, Lorch, & Ranko, 2019; Ketchley, 2019; Stacher, 2015).

Since General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi came to power, the state has relied heavily on the military response as the guardian of the state and regime. This encourages Sisi to strengthen ties with the military elites in governmental affairs and policies (Taha, 2015) while deploying it as a regime security tool for national stability. In the case of national stability, Sisi and his military governments call for a referendum and constitutional amendments attempting to extend Sisi's presidential term until 2030 (Mirshak, 2019). In order to remain in power until that period amidst political turmoil and weak national consensus, Sisi needs to strengthen and secure his regime from all kinds of threats (Jackson, 2016). According to Koblenz (2013), threats to the generally come from within the state. Such threats are as dangerous as those from outside the country. Therefore, the regime must have the ability to anticipate the kinds of internal threats that it faces and chooses the appropriate strategies to reduce them. Successfully implementing the strategies, the regime would feel secure from any threats that may depose them down and then provide national stability and security.

Many scholars have studied the role of military following the Arab Revolution. Some of them focus on civil-military relation (Croissant, Kuehn, Chambers, and Wolf, 2010), military response during the transition period (Mietzner, 2014), and the impact of military political interventions (Springborg, 2017; Kuehn, 2017). However, there has been no research on how regime dependent on military with its kind of intervention seek to preserve security and stability. In Sisi's case, his regime used the military as a tool to secure the regime in order to achieve stability. This paper aims to explore more on what internal threats Sisi's regime faces that can threaten regime security and state stability and what strategies they implement to reduce these threats. This paper also examines the impact of military rule on economic stability under Sisi's regime.

II. METHODS

This paper uses qualitative research through descriptive and explanatory approaches. The paper focuses on data collections while analyzing them as a research strategy (Creswell, 2009). As this research will examine the social field regarding political issues in Egypt, a qualitative research seems appropriate to find the research concerns.

The authors choose library research methods by employing such secondary resources as books, journals, reports, and digital media due to unfavorable conditions during the outbreak of COVID-19 to find primary resources. To serve the research in a proper manner, the authors use Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Hubberman's analysis method, namely data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions.

III. DISCUSSION

3.1 Sisi's Regime Security Strategies and Its Impact on Democratization Process

Ascending as president in 2014, Sisi becomes the fourth military member to rule the country since 1952. All previous military presidents formed authoritarian governments under which the military enjoyed a wide range of political and economic privileges. The military is an important tool in the coup-proof strategy and an integral element to secure the regime (Abul-Magd, 2015). Up to now, all sorts of attempts to counterbalance or reduce military roles have proved unsuccessful.

Sisi's regime needs to have military back-up to stay safely in power until 2030 as the referendum on constitutional amendments, approved by parliament, allows the General to extend his term in office (BBC News, 2019). As Sisi will remain in power for a long period amidst the lack of popular support from Egyptians, The General obviously needs military support to secure the regime's survival. This indicates that the focus of the discussion on security during Sisi's administration was the state actor or the regime itself. As Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde (1998) conveyed, securitization plays an important role in making state actors (regime) the subject of security to maintain the state's sustainability.

In Regime Security theory, internal threats have a more dangerous portion than external threats, so that the focus of the state security strategy is centered on domestic threats. This theory confirms that the core unit of securitization analysis is a regime, not a state (Koblentz, 2013). The regime needs safe condition from any threats to their power (Jackson, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the possible factors that may pose a security threat to the ruling regime and what strategies the regime deploys to overcome any threats so that they can hold their position and remain in power safely.

Lack support regime generally faces a continuing threat from influential oppositions who are capable of challenging the authorities. They might consist of politicians, religious or traditional leaders, criminal gangs, and charismatic individuals who have massive followers and personal access to weapons or armed forces (Jackson, 2016). In Egypt, this kind of threat derives from influential individuals or groups (mostly Moslem Brotherhood) who often criticize and protest against regime policy.

To suppress resistance voices, Sisi's regime often threatens demonstrators by labeling them as Islamists or terrorists affiliating with the MB. Often the regime even perpetuates arbitrary arrests against them. The targets are human right lawyers, journalists, political activists and politicians (Amnesty International, 2019). The imprisonment of government opposition is the regime's main strategy in securing position. The strategies implemented to reduce threats from an influential opposition group or individuals vary, such as intimidation, torture, imprisonment, and even extrajudicial killings. Another strategy could be in the form of manipulation of the political democracy process by disqualifying competing candidates or creating manipulative competitors (Jackson, 2016).

Referring to a study by Springborg (2017), in 2014, the Sisi's regime imprisoned around 40,000 people, most of whom MB-affiliated activists. Meanwhile, the latest version of data from WikiThawra notes that there were more than 125,000 political prisoners in the period from July 2013 to January 2018. Next, human rights groups also documented widespread torture, cases of missing persons, and extrajudicial killings against the opposition. Such repressive actions against political opponents even increased during the 2018 presidential election, mostly against Islamist politicians and figures from the Mubarak era who ran for presidential elections (Ketchley, 2019). This led some rival candidates to end their presidential bid while others were detained (Mirshak, 2019).

According to Stacher (2015), the repressive action and detainment sentence to oppositions are necessary to weaken their power because if the regime ignores their growing influence, opposition groups such as the MB and its affiliation may consolidate and pose another threat to the regime soon. Tabaar (2013) has the same view as well. According to him, the regime needs to suppress political rivals and opposition movements for the sake of national stability. If the regime fails to preserve stability and security, this situation can provide an opportunity for opposition groups to resist and commit acts of violence. This situation, according to Saouli (2020), presents a dilemma for the regime. On the one hand, the regime needs legitimacy in its power through political incorporation, which means democratization. On the other hand, the regime needs to survive in power to defend its political vision and national ideological projects from the threat of opposition with different visions and missions.

The next security challenge faced by Sisi's regime stems from the uprising of the Takfiri group in north Sinai (Taha, 2015). The threat in Sinai has led to approximately 14 attacks on the pipeline that supplies gas to Israel and Jordan. Other attack targets include repeated abduction of tourists, vandalism of police stations (Frisch, 2013), attacks on military bases, and state infrastructure.

To cope with this security threat, the states generally choose a blockade strategy while, in more extreme cases, they do not even hesitate to commit mass genocide or ethnic cleansing (Jackson, 2016). Sisi's regime took steps regarding the Sinai issue by blocking the roads and bridges connected to Sinai. The military, in addition, established tight checkpoints. This strategy aims to cut off the supply of food and weapons to these extremist groups. Besides, the government took over the media, providing them access to manipulate the spreading information about all kinds of actions that were taking place there (Taha, 2015). Considering Sisi's regime security strategy above, this article finds that the regime's repressive measures have a negative impact on the democratic process. Freedom House gives a score of 21 per 100 on freedom in Egypt, which indicates that the status of freedom in Egypt is terrible. The score is calculated based on various kinds of assessments such as government control of the electoral process, persecution of potential opposition, freedom of the press, military privileges, etc. (Freedom House, 2020).

However, it would be too pessimistic if we judge that the consolidation of democracy in Egypt will not be successful in the future. Oo (2012) argues that the inconvenient truth of democratization is that democratic transitions are full of imperfections. The democracy standard that is upheld by Western liberal democracy may not be appropriate to measure democratization achievement in new democracies, particularly democratization in the Middle East. The determining factor for the success of democracy is neither the time nor the conditions that exist during the transition. The consolidation of democracy depends on how political actors progressively increase the essential foundation after the transition progresses. Transitions can occur in very unfavorable situations.

Min Zaw Oo admitted that military-ruled states are less likely to consolidate because the armed forces hardly leave politics. Most military-ruled countries experience the largest number of multiple transitions and the most frequent democracy reversal. However, it would be unwise if we assess that Egypt's current democratization process has failed as the work of Min Zao Oo found that some military-ruled transitions had to go through at least more than three election cycles to consolidate democracies despite the imperfect standard (Oo, 2012).

3.2 Egypt's Economic Stability under Sisi's Military Government

The Arab uprisings in 2011 was fundamentally an economy-based event. Many took to the street to protest low wages (Dahshan, 2015), job scarcity and an increase in unemployment among the younger generation (Joya, 2017). Such issues prompted President Sisi to take radical steps in the process of economic change once he took office. He seeks to combine a business-friendly approach and the military's increasing role as a development engine. Next, Sisi involved the military in significant projects, the New Suez Canal project for instance (Dahshan, 2015). Thus, the army institution can further expand their control over the economy. Approximately 40% of the economic sector has been controlled by the military, especially in the infrastructure and retail sectors (Joya, 2017).

Sisi, then, sought to boost the country's economy by establishing close links to the Gulf countries and inviting them to invest. The Gulf states, excluding Qatar, offered petroleum and energy products and guaranteed cash flows to support the Central Bank of Egypt. The total pledges of financial assistance amount to USD 20 billion. Sisi's priorities were largely determined by a desire to reposition Egypt as an attractive investment destination, aiming to reduce the deficit to below 10% of GDP and expand government revenue. These efforts were later followed by austerity measures and drastic cuts in public spending. Sisi also raised taxes, cut subsidies, and launched massive privatization programs in all economic sectors (Joya, 2017).

The result of Sisi's economic reforms in his first term in office shows that he was seemingly quite successful in improving the Egyptian economy. Egypt's GDP's annual growth rate even almost reached 6% at the beginning of his reign. However, Egypt's economic development cannot be said to successfully grow as its GDP annual growth rate dropped twice to reach below 5% over Sisi's first period. The worst decline

occurred in mid-2016, which almost stood at 2%.

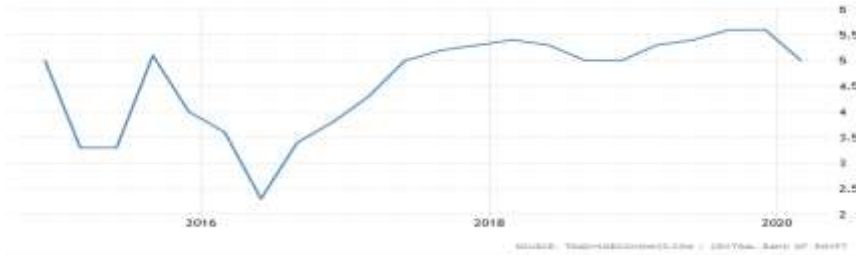


Figure 1: Egypt's GDP annual growth rate over Sisi's first presidential term.

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/gdp-growth-annual>

In Sisi's second period or over the last three years, Egypt's economic growth has also increased. The increase derives from the tourism sector, remittances from Egyptian workers abroad and from the energy sector - the latest natural gas discovery. The highest increase occurred between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, with the annual GDP growth rate reached 5.6%. However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, growth starts to decline again (Mourad, 2020). Even so, the Egyptian economy over Sisi's second period can be said to be relatively stable as the data shows a stable trend in the range of 5% (see figure 1).

Given Egypt's GDP statistics, especially in Sisi's second term, we cannot deny that the military government's role with all kinds of its repressive actions to secure Sisi's regime can stabilize the economy. A state may not achieve economic stability without political stability. Therefore, this paper argues that under certain circumstances, repressive measures are necessary to preserve stability. It is necessarily considered that Egyptian governments take preventative action through repressive measures to prevent opposition voices that can cause political instability. As the work of Abdelkader (2017) found, political instability negatively affects economic growth in Egypt. The study further explains that political stability determines economic growth in the case of Egypt.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The high level of dissatisfaction with Sisi's government indicates the lack of popular support for the regime. This means that Sisi's regime is vulnerable to internal threats. To deal with the threats, Sisi needs military back-up as he will remain in power for a long period of time. The military, then, is the inevitable tool to secure Sisi's regime regarding an influential role that military gains after The Arab Uprising event. The threats to Sisi's regime entail individual or opposition groups, including MB and its networks, and Takfiri rebellion groups in north Sinai. Dealing with such internal threats, the military government frequently implements high repressions and violence. Among them are intimidation, detainment, manipulation of the political process, extrajudicial killings to opposition figures, and cutting of public goods supplies through blockades, tightening checkpoints and media manipulation about what the armed forces did to rebel groups in Sinai.

Sisi's regime security approach certainly negatively affects Egypt's democratization process. However, this does not mean that democratic consolidation has ended and failed. Military-ruled states basically need to go through more than three election cycles to consolidate. Even so, Sisi's military government, is capable of showing good performance in the economic sector. The economy grows steadily, bringing stability to the GDP annual growth rate at 5% in the second term of Sisi's presidency. Finally, we suggest that future study need to examine what factors led to steady economic growth in a repressive or semi-authoritarian regime.

Acknowledgments The author would like to thank to Universitas Indonesia for funding this research.

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