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## A New Egyptian Power Play

*By pushing new constitutional changes, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi aims to become president for life. That seems fine with President Trump.*

By The Editorial Board

As President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt prepares constitutional changes that could keep him in power until 2034 and enhance military control over the country, President Trump is preparing to welcome him to the White House. This is the second time Mr. Trump will bestow this diplomatic gift on Mr. el-Sisi, one of the most authoritarian leaders in the Middle East.

After taking power in a 2013 coup that ousted the country's first elected president, the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, Mr. el-Sisi, a former army chief, promised his people that he would build democracy and leave office in 2022 after completing a second term.

Instead, he has built a reputation for brutality and repression, torturing and killing hundreds of Egyptians and jailing perhaps as many as 60,000 others, including students and American citizens.

It is not unusual for American presidents to work with strongmen to advance national interests. But if Mr. Trump welcomes Mr. el-Sisi to Washington now, without pressing him for reforms rather than acquiescing to his power grab, he will be crushing hopes that Egypt could become democratic any time soon.

Mr. el-Sisi made his move in February when the rubber-stamp Parliament gave preliminary approval to a package of amendments to Egypt's 2014 Constitution, which was adopted after the 2011 Arab Spring uprising ended the 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak, leading to Mr. Morsi's election.

In addition to extending presidential terms to six years from four, and allowing him to run two more times, the amendments would grant the armed forces expansive authority to intervene in the government, give Mr. el-Sisi more control over appointing senior judges and provide military courts broader jurisdiction to try civilians.

A final parliamentary vote is due by mid-April; then the amendments are supposed to be submitted to a referendum. But officials are stifling all dissent.

No members of the political opposition have been allowed to participate in the government's national dialogue sessions on the changes. Several people who posted videos on Facebook criticizing the amendments have been arrested. Two Egyptian actors who criticized Mr. el-Sisi on a panel with a congressman in Washington last week were subsequently expelled from their union, which accused them of treason.

There's been no pushback on any of this from Mr. Trump, who has shown great affection for autocrats, fawning over Mr. el-Sisi on his first White House visit, in 2017.

Mr. Trump might be able to salvage the April 9 visit if he warns that some of the \$1.3 billion in annual American military aid could be at risk if the Egyptian leader doesn't pursue a democratic path.

For many years, the United States has been reluctant to use aid as leverage, concerned that doing so could jeopardize Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, along with American access to the Suez Canal, overflight rights and counterterrorism cooperation. But peace with Israel, international use of the canal and cooperating in the fight against terrorism are in Egypt's own interest, and they are unlikely to be abandoned if America stands up for democratic principles.

Under pressure from Congress, which set certain conditions for aid, the Trump administration in 2017 temporarily withheld \$300 million. That helped persuade Egypt to acquit employees of several American and European institutes who were charged for doing democracy-related work and to suspend implementation of a law cracking down on such groups. Millions more dollars from 2018 and 2019 are being held in abeyance pending certification that Egypt met congressional conditions, congressional sources said.

If Mr. Trump will not call Mr. el-Sisi to account, Congress can try. American aid should not come in a blank check. Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, has placed a hold on \$105 million of aid to get Egypt to compensate April Corley, the American injured in 2015 when Egypt's armed forces, using American weapons, mistakenly shot up a tourist group. Mr. Leahy also wants more clarity about Egypt's secretive military campaign against an Islamic State group in Sinai.

Barring a principled response to Mr. el-Sisi, the United States will be further complicit in shoring up his military dictatorship, disenfranchising most Egyptians and fueling the kind of instability that is certain to produce a new generation of extremists. That is not in Egypt's interests, nor America's.