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Sisi to be Warmly Received at White House but Not in Congress

While Sisi will certainly enjoy praise from Trump and will use it politically at home, the bilateral relationship is likely headed for rough waters as Congress asserts its prerogatives.

By Gregory Aftandilian

The April 9 trip by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to Washington has been interpreted by critics of the Egyptian leader as a way to show that he has US President Donald Trump's endorsement as he moves ahead with constitutional changes aimed in large part at eliminating Egypt's two-term presidential limit.

Trump is expected to warmly praise Sisi for his leadership, fight against terrorists and role in joining other regional countries in opposing Iran. During Sisi's 2017 White House visit, Trump lauded him for doing a "fantastic job in a very difficult situation" and is likely to do so again.

Sisi is expected to tout his government's economic reforms, the crackdown on terrorism and mediation efforts that defused periodic violent episodes between Hamas and Israel and earned him praise from the Israeli government.

Although Trump pushed Sisi in 2017 to release an American citizen, NGO worker Aya Hijaz, and her Egyptian husband, he has not, in general, made human rights a priority. Nor is Trump likely to be bothered by proposed constitutional changes that would allow Sisi to potentially remain president through 2034 or have enhanced presidential powers over the judiciary.

Trump might finesse that issue by stating that it is up to the Egyptian people to decide and leave it at that but his lack of criticism over the proposals and the imprisonment of journalists and dissidents will likely be interpreted in Egypt as Sisi having Trump's full blessing.

A spat in 2017 over Egypt's draconian NGO law and reported military assistance to North Korea caused the Trump administration to suspend \$195 million in military aid but that assistance has since been restored. In the Trump administration's fiscal year 2020 budget request, Egypt is to receive the usual \$1.3 billion in military aid, another indication that Trump wants the bilateral relationship to be business as usual.

However, the other parts of the Washington policy community — Congress, think-tanks and the media — are unlikely to be so welcoming.

The Washington Post, a long-time critic of Sisi, editorialised on April 4 that Trump is betting on the “latest generation dictators,” including in Egypt. The editorial added that Trump should press Sisi to “stop suppressing civil society and jailing peaceful opponents” and to drop “his misguided attempt to change the constitution” so he can serve “for life.”

The think-tanks, in general, were equally critical, with some charging that Sisi is “worse than [Hosni] Mubarak.” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace scheduled a conference on the topic: “Will Sisi be president for life?” one day before the Egyptian president was to visit the White House.

It is Congress, however, that is more consequential because it controls the appropriations process. Here, Sisi is likely to encounter a mixed reception at best.

Although some members of Congress supported Sisi in his crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups as well as his close relations with Israel, many other legislators are upset over the arrest of Egyptian civil society activists, journalists and bloggers.

Even Trump ally US Senator Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican chairman of the subcommittee in charge of foreign aid, along with the ranking member of that subcommittee, Senator Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, has supported the inclusion of democratic benchmarks as a way of conditioning military aid to Egypt.

A few years ago, Graham said that if Sisi “did something... as a real serious move on the [human] rights front,” it would make it “easier for a guy like me to help.” Although Sisi’s government has released a few journalists in recent weeks and has reportedly undertaken a “review” of the controversial 2017 NGO law, this may not be enough to change the mind of key US legislators.

Efforts by Congress in 2017 to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, a policy in line with Sisi’s, stalled because the Trump administration realised that the bill might jeopardise US relations with some friendly Arab countries that have Islamist parties as part of their governments. The leading advocate of this legislation, Senator Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican, has not reintroduced his bill in the current Congress.

Another problem for Sisi is that Leahy recently put a hold on sale of Apache helicopters to Egypt for what he sees as an inadequate response to the wounding of an American citizen, April Corley, when her tour bus was mistakenly attacked by the Egyptian military in 2015. An aide to Leahy called Egypt’s compensation offer “woefully inadequate.”

Given the peculiar rules of the Senate, Leahy can maintain this hold for quite some time. An underlying motive may be that human rights groups have charged that some of the helicopters have been used to commit human rights violations.

The administration in the White House has usually prevailed in the fight over US military aid to Egypt because it has pressured Congress to include a “national security waiver” in the legislation, which allowed it to bypass conditionality clauses. This time, especially now that Democrats control the House of Representatives, Congress might not buckle.

Hence, while Sisi will certainly enjoy praise from Trump and will use it politically at home, the bilateral relationship is likely headed for rough waters as Congress asserts its prerogatives.

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