

Egypt's Populocracy

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Photo by [Alisdare Hickson](#) (CC)

In the ten years since the Arab Spring, President Sisi has transformed the country into a military-backed “populocracy,” an authoritarian form of government with populist aspirations and power centralized in one person.

[Note: this is an excerpt from a [longer piece](#) published by the Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI).]

The protests that began in Egypt on January 25, 2011, resulted in a [coup-volution](#), and the country has since developed into a populocracy, the latest in a pattern of [authoritarian persistence](#). The military exploited a genuine popular movement in 2011 to unseat former president Hosni Mubarak, who had threatened the military’s primordial place in the state by grooming his son for succession. Once the coup-volution removed this threat, and once Egypt’s first freely elected president was [removed from power](#) in 2013, the administration of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi proceeded to [lengthen and deepen](#) the military’s hold on power with the veneer of a popular mandate.

The pathway to populocracy indicates how civil-military relations have [shaped the country](#). Egyptians are worse off in 2021 than they were in 2011, with [fewer freedoms](#), [less economic opportunity](#), and worse human development, but Egyptians who remember the tumult of the Arab Spring are loth to challenge Sisi’s rule,

suggesting that a change in Egypt's populocracy is unlikely any time soon. It may even be a generation before Egyptians forget 2011 and, once again fed up with their dwindling lot, throw off the ruler of the day in favor of whatever or whoever comes next.

Changes in Civil-Military Relations

Three changes in civil-military relations have corresponded with the consolidation of Egypt's populocracy. The first is that the military in general, and the Sisi administration in particular, adopted an unyielding stance on dissent. They learned from the [failures of the Mubarak administration](#). When protests [organized offline](#) grew into large protests organized on social media, they caught police by surprise, and emboldened protesters marched on Tahrir and lit the tinderbox of revolution. The lesson to military leaders was clear: take an unyielding stance against popular dissent or suffer the same fate as Mubarak. What few protests have arisen have been [summarily repressed](#), and the Sisi administration has not shied away from [using force](#) to do so, an unyielding approach to dissent that is critical to Egypt's populocracy.

The second change in civil-military relations is that the Sisi administration has [cultivated an alliance](#) with [like-minded states](#) such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This [external support](#) has allowed Sisi to deflect domestic calls for change and [underwrite](#) one of the [largest military buildups](#) in Egypt's history. There is a populist element to these alliances, as well. The 2013 removal of former president Mohammed Morsi [reinforced](#) the narrative of Egypt as a secular, anti-Islamist nation and allowed Sisi to position himself as a defender of the national will. Billions of dollars of fiscal and monetary support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia reinforced this anti-Islamist stance and helped Sisi consolidate Egypt's populocracy.

A third change in civil-military relations that has reinforced populocracy is the Egyptian military's increasing influence over the economy. Building on a [pattern](#) that [began](#) in the 1970s, military companies and contractors have garnered an [ever-expanding role](#) in the civilian economy. The military [distorts](#) the economy's transparency and development, allowing the Sisi administration to solidify the support of military officers who benefit. A new [ruling class of military officers](#) has risen up, and the [military's prominence squeezes out opportunities](#) for genuine economic development, [makes it harder](#) for the military to extricate itself from business and power, and leads to the [squandering of capital](#).

Simplified Civil-Military Relations

The consolidation of Egypt's populocracy has made civil-military relations much simpler in 2021 than they were in 2011. The Egyptian military does not worry about an assertive interior ministry or an independent president to challenge its hold on

power. A distortive influence on the economy, the support of regional allies, and an unyielding approach to dissent maintain the military's hold on power, because Egyptians remember the tumult of the Arab Spring and have little stomach to revisit that uncertain time. In the event that a new generation rises that does not remember this uncertainty, but is intimately familiar with repression and lack of opportunity, then something new—or at least different—will replace Egypt's populocracy.

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