

Egypt's military will entrench control of public life

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Two legislative amendments backed by parliament are another step in the creation of a parallel military state

On July 6, parliament approved two amendments concerning the military's role in public and political life. The most notable change institutionalises the control by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) over officers' participation in elections; another extends the military's reach into local government. These represent a further step in the construction of a parallel state run by the armed forces, and the reduction of civilian authority in all areas.



Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi attends a military ceremony (Reuters/Charles Platiau)

What next

The rules facilitate the SCAF's protection of Sisi from potential rivals within the military -- which in the current military-dominated climate is the only source of viable contenders. For his part, Sisi will continue to purge the security apparatus of possible opponents, while creating patronage networks in parliament and local government.

Subsidiary Impacts

- Elections to the reinstated Senate scheduled for August will result in a major win for pro-Sisi candidates.
- Local governance and education at all levels will experience greater interference from the armed forces.
- Activities of international organisations and businesses across Egypt will be increasingly subject to monitoring by military authorities.

Analysis

The House of Representatives, dominated by pro-Sisi coalitions, approved an amendment to Law 232 of 1959, regulating terms of service of members of the armed forces. The amendment means military officers (active or former) require SCAF approval to run for president, parliament or local government. A second amendment calls for a military adviser and military assistants to be appointed to each governorate.

Sisi's control over the political, economic and security spheres has been steadily tightening since the former field marshal assumed power in a 2013 coup. Much of this has first been de facto, then made de jure. These amendments represent another instance of the formalisation of unofficial but established trends.

They follow a 2019 constitutional referendum that allows Sisi to stay in power until 2030; he would have otherwise been obliged to step down in 2022 (see [EGYPT: Cairo to push unpopular agenda post-referendum - May 2, 2019](#)). The constitutional amendments also institutionalised the armed forces as effectively the supreme political authority -- granting the military the right to intervene as it sees necessary to 'safeguard the constitution'.

Another change was to reinstate the 300-seat Senate (dissolved in 2014 following criticism over corruption), with one-third of its members to be appointed by the president.

Controlled participation

Law 232 of 1959 already prohibits active officers from sharing political opinions or taking part in political activities. The new clause formally extends SCAF control over officers' political participation after retirement or resignation.

Yet this has already been selectively applied in practice through technicalities and outright manipulation, notably against three officers who attempted to stand against Sisi in the 2018 presidential elections, which he ultimately won with 97% of the vote (see EGYPT: Sisi aims for economic takeoff in second term - March 29, 2018).

Sami Anan, a former armed forces chief of staff, was arrested after announcing his intention to run. Although past the mandatory retirement age, and indeed forcibly pensioned off in 2012, Anan was charged with forging papers certifying the conclusion of his service. A law stipulating that former SCAF members remain in 'reserve' was also used against him. Anan was jailed for nearly two years and remains under house arrest.

A less high-profile officer, Ahmed Konsowa, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment by a military court after indicating his intention to run in December 2017. He was charged with expressing political opinions while wearing military uniform, and for doing so while remaining in active service -- despite multiple attempts to resign years previously to run for parliament in 2015.

Even without these charges, the authorities would have almost certainly prohibited the officers' participation by other means.

No pretence of formality was applied to Ahmed Shafiq, a retired air force commander. When Shafiq announced his bid for the presidency from the United Arab Emirates in 2018, he was swiftly arrested by Emirati authorities (close allies of Sisi's government) and deported to Egypt, where he was held incommunicado before announcing his withdrawal from the race.

Carrots and sticks

Although the new rules on political participation are primarily designed to exclude uncooperative military men from political participation, they also provide an opportunity for the SCAF to hand out lucrative seats in parliament and local government to reward loyalty. Indeed, there is a high likelihood that the newly reinstated Senate will include a significant contingent of retired military (and intelligence) officers following an election scheduled for August.

SCAF composition

In theory, the new law granting the SCAF control over officers' political participation could allow the body to be a counterweight to Sisi's power, as the former general would require its approval to run in the 2024 elections.

Until now, however, the SCAF has shown little independence from Sisi. As president, the latter sits at the head of the Council, with the defence minister (a presidential appointee) as chairman.

Sisi has largely handpicked the SCAF's members

Even before assuming the presidency, Sisi had a heavy hand in determining who got a seat on the powerful Council. As newly appointed defence minister in 2012, Sisi took advantage of his prerogatives to reshuffle its composition, stacking the SCAF with allies. The SCAF's members (owing their seats to Sisi) then threw their weight behind him in the 2014 presidential elections.

Sisi's subsequent purges among the top brass mean only a handful of the 26 members from that time remain in the Council, but more recent appointees proved equally enthusiastic for him to preserve his presidential post in the 2018 elections.

The president has also flouted the SCAF's authority without apparent consequence, such as when he appointed a defence minister without SCAF approval in June 2018. The move contradicted Law 20 of 2014, issued by interim President Adly Mansour, requiring SCAF approval for the president's nominee.

It is doubtful whether SCAF members would sacrifice their powerful positions to confront Sisi. Still, the draft law has implications for the post-Sisi future, serving as yet another legal measure that

institutionalises top generals' prerogatives in defining political life.

Local government

The second significant amendment -- calling for a military adviser and military assistants to be appointed to each governorate -- ensures that the armed forces will have eyes and ears on the ground throughout the country.

The team is to be chosen by the defence minister, who will also define the exact scope of their powers.

Such advisers are to be tasked with a range of activities, including monitoring "the provision of services to citizens" and "the progress of development projects", as well as reporting to the Ministry of Defence "any potential dangers that could compromise the state".

The armed forces will have formal oversight and input into school curricula

An additional clause requires the military adviser to coordinate with local educational authorities over a military section in the school curriculum according to guidelines set by the Ministry of Defence, including:

- providing instruction on 'military culture';
- promoting awareness of (military-led) national projects; and
- education on the military's role in 'safeguarding the constitution and democracy'.

Egypt has a long history of appointing retired military officers to head governorates. Even in 2012 (before Sisi became president), 18 of 27 provincial governors were retired army generals, with many more serving as governors' chiefs-of-staff. The new amendments ensure that all governorates are closely monitored by loyalists, without the negative optics of appointing a full house of military men.