

Egyptian Autocracy Promotion in Libya and Tunisia

Lisa Michelutto

Università degli studi di Trieste.
michelutto@student.unisi.it

Italia

*Promozione dell'autocrazia egiziana
in Libia e Tunisia*

Recibido: 21 de noviembre de 2022

Aceptado: 2 de diciembre de 2022

Abstract

The basis of this paper is an analysis of el-Sisi's Egypt's autocratic promotion of Libya and Tunisia. At the structural level, the paper is divided into three parts: in the first, Egyptian autocracy promotion is analyzed at the empirical level in Libya and Tunisia. As for Libya, rewards prevailed (training the armed forces and selling weapons), although there has been blackmail against Marshal Haftar. Egyptian rewards in Tunisia have been weaker than in Libya: they have been mainly diplomatic. That is why it is possible to affirm that there has been a strong emulation of Saïed towards el-Sisi. The paper then goes on to place the two cases within Fossati's (2022) typology. Therefore, it is possible to come to the conclusion that Egyptian autocracy promotion in Libya was rigid until 2020, when el-Sisi only supported Haftar, but became flexible after 2020, when el-Sisi began to negotiate with the government in Tripoli. In both cases we have soft power relations. As for Tunisia, Egyptian autocracy promotion is flexible with soft power relations. Finally, an interesting assessment is presented concerning the relationship between values and interests in el-Sisi's foreign policy in the two countries analyzed. Egyptian autocracy promotion has indeed almost always been ideological,

both in Libya and in Tunisia, although interests have come into play in the second phase in Libya, when el-Sisi moderated his position and began the negotiations with the Tripoli government.

Keywords

Autocracy promotion, foreign policy, Egypt, Middle East, conflicts.

Resumo

Alla base di questo elaborato vi è un'analisi della promozione autocratica dell'Egitto di al-Sisi in Libia e Tunisia. A livello strutturale, il documento è diviso in tre parti: nella prima, la promozione dell'autocrazia egiziana viene analizzata a livello empirico in Libia e Tunisia. Per quanto riguarda la Libia, gli incentivi all'autocrazia hanno prevalso (addestramento delle forze armate e vendita di armi), anche se ci sono stati ricatti contro il maresciallo Haftar. Gli incentivi egiziani in Tunisia sono stati più deboli che in Libia: sono stati soprattutto diplomatici. Per questo è possibile affermare che c'è stata una forte emulazione di Saïed nei confronti di al-Sisi. Il documento passa poi a collocare i due casi all'interno della tipologia di Fossati (2022). Pertanto, è possibile giungere alla conclusione che la promozione dell'autocrazia egiziana in Libia è stata rigida fino al 2020, quando al-Sisi ha sostenuto solo Haftar, ma è diventata flessibile dopo il 2020, quando al-Sisi ha iniziato a negoziare con il governo di Tripoli. In entrambi i casi si tratta di relazioni di soft power. Come per la Tunisia, la promozione dell'autocrazia egiziana è flessibile con relazioni di soft power. Infine, viene presentata un'interessante valutazione del rapporto tra valori e interessi nella politica estera di al-Sisi nei due Paesi analizzati. La promozione dell'autocrazia egiziana è stata infatti quasi sempre ideologica, sia in Libia che in Tunisia, anche se gli interessi sono entrati in gioco nella seconda fase in Libia, quando al-Sisi ha moderato la sua posizione e ha iniziato i negoziati con il governo di Tripoli.

Parole chiave

Promozione dell'autocrazia, politica estera, Egitto, Medio Oriente, conflitti.

El-Sisi's autocracy promotion in Libya and Tunisia

Autocracy promotion is the promotion of anti-democratic and often anti-Western values by some governments against others. Some examples of authoritarian promotion in the world are Russia, China, Turkey, and of course Egypt (although we could mention many others). Egypt has, in fact, promoted autocracy in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. As for the models of autocracy promotion, there are four (Fossati, 2022): military intervention (most frequent during the Cold War), economic blackmail (which consists of applying sanctions to pro-Western democratic regimes), rewards (aid to authoritarian and hybrid regimes through military and economic assistance), and spontaneous emulation (when countries voluntarily take a cue from an authoritarian regime).

Therefore, in this article I want to analyze which of these models Egypt develops in Libya and Tunisia, but before proceeding with the discussion, for a better understanding of the text, it would be useful to define Egypt's regime with President el-Sisi. From Nasser to the present-day Egypt has, in fact, gone through several regime changes: a brief phase of military rule in 1953, Nasser's personalistic regime since 1954, Sadat's hybrid regime, Mubarak's personalistic regime, and with el-Sisi a military authoritarian regime. After the Arab Spring there were indeed elections: the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) Freedom and Justice Party won. Then, in May 2012, presidential elections were held, in which candidate Mohamed Morsi (whose party was precisely that of the MBs) won. However, the following year Egypt saw a new wave of protests against Morsi, who was accused of wanting to promote the Islamization of society (Fossati 2018b). That is why the armed forces and in particular the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces Abdel Fattah el-Sisi organized a coup d'état that overthrew Morsi and returned the country to a regime with a military-style authoritarian leader. He decided early on to eliminate the opposition, for example by having numerous members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrested and declared to be a terrorist organization.

Thus, Egypt is an authoritarian regime that promotes anti-democratic values in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. With the aim of

classifying Egyptian autocracy promotion based on the typology outlined by Fossati (2022), it is necessary to analyze and establish the type of linkage between the various Libyan political actors and Egyptian President el-Sisi. El-Sisi has officially supported Haftar since 2014, the year of Operation Dignity, an operation aimed at attacking pro-fundamentalist militias in Benghazi. Indeed, the two leaders share many ideological points, but the most salient are the military component and the fight against political Islam, represented in Libya by the Justice and Development Party. El-Sisi wants to prevent this religious and political group from growing stronger and stronger within Libya, since this would mean a consequent strengthening of the Egyptian Brotherhood, which he has always sought to limit. Given that Marshal Haftar is himself engaged in fighting political Islam, it is not difficult to understand el-Sisi's support (very thinly veiled support, moreover). Let's also recall that there are two different governments in Libya due to the civil war: in the western area (Tripolitania) an "informal" fundamentalist theocracy and in Cyrenaica an "informal" military regime (Fossati, 2018b).

Egyptian support for the Libyan marshal came through the autocracy promotion model of autocracy rewards, mainly diplomatic support, economic aid, military training, arms sales, and intelligence support (Toaldo, 2015). These actions are also frowned upon internationally as a violation of UN Embargo Resolution 1970/2011¹. Although another commonality between el-Sisi and Haftar is the role of the armed forces in their regimes, Egyptian military support in Libya has been only indirect and, therefore, aimed at hitting specific targets, namely the Islamic State. In fact, there have been terrorist incidents in the eastern Libyan area on several occasions that have worried the Egyptian president. This is why in 2014, Cairo announced that it would train Libyan forces to fight terrorism and safeguard the border². On February 16, 2015, for example, Islamic State forces beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts: in response, el-Sisi organized an armed intervention. He decided to carry out air and ground raids in the area of Derna, a city occupied by the jihadists (Meringolo, 2015). These attacks were obviously carried out jointly with the Tobruk authority (Tolba, & Bushra, 2015). More Egyptian bombings were then record-

¹ Indeed, el-Sisi called for the lifting of the arms embargo with the aim of allowing the Tobruk authorities to arm themselves further. But all this remained only a proposal. Meringolo, A. (2015a). From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy. *Insight Egypt*, 3.

² Reuters (2014, October 8). Egypt, Libya announces deeper security cooperation to "fight terrorism". Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/08/us-egypt-libya-security-idUSKCN0HX1J020141008>.

³⁾ Al Jazeera (2017, May 27). Egypt launches strikes in Libya after Minya attack. ISIL/ISIS News | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/5/27/egypt-launches-strikes-in-libya-after-minya-attack>.

ed in March 2016 and May 2017, as a result of an attack on some Coptic Christians in the Egyptian province of Minya³.

In 2019 the Libyan conflict became more complicated given Turkish interference. President Erdogan decided, in fact, to openly support the government opposing Haftar's in order to pose an obstacle for el-Sisi, given his behavior toward the Muslim Brotherhood (let's recall the link between Erdogan and the Brotherhood). Considering, moreover, that Haftar has also always fought against the Justice and Development Party, it is not difficult to imagine Turkish support for the GNA. Thus, two "blocs" were created: Egypt and Russia supporting Marshal Haftar and Turkey and other international actors supporting the Tripoli government. Unlike Egypt's indirect military aid to Cyrenaica, Turkey developed direct military actions to hinder Haftar. That was why when in April 2019 armed forces led by Marshal Haftar made a surprise attack on the city of Tripoli with the aim of removing the Government of National Accord, the attempt failed: the government managed to defend itself with Turkish help (they also provided drones and other military equipment). Likewise, however, the Libyan marshal enjoyed Russian support, as there were hundreds of mercenaries in the territory, although the Kremlin has always denied any knowledge of this (Shay, 2019). At this point, it is interesting to briefly outline the relationship between Egypt and Russia, given the support of both for Haftar. In 2018, for example, el-Sisi attended the Sochi summit, during which he signed a Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement with President Putin. Later, through a phone call, both decided on the implementation of their bilateral cooperation, both economically and with the aim of reaching a solution to the Libyan conflict. However, despite Russian and Egyptian support, Haftar was forced to withdraw from the Western Front in 2020. El-Sisi was very worried about this, so he tried to obtain a ceasefire through the "Cairo Declaration," which, however, was not approved by either Tripoli or Turkey (Melcangi, 2021). This therefore made Egypt exasperated, leading to a strong risk of military escalation, which was, however, avoided thanks to the recent rapprochement of el-Sisi and Erdogan. Indeed, in recent months there has been a strategic rapprochement between the two actors: the Egyptian president declared that he would no longer "support the raids of Haftar's militias" and that he would

⁴⁾ The last Egyptian visit in Tripoli had been in fact in 2014.

reopen the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli (Maccarrone, 2021). Instead, Erdogan asked Egypt's opposition Turkish TV channels to moderate their criticism of al-Sisi (Reuters, 2021). It is important to remember that Libya does not yet enjoy a real peace, but only a truce, thus a suspension of the war. A balance of power prevailed both between Egypt and Turkey and between Haftar and Tripoli. El-Sisi even decided to revise his foreign policy, developing meetings with the Tripoli government, and affirming his desire to achieve Libyan stability, which he considered impossible without an agreement between the two sides (Raineri, 2020). In December 2020, for example, senior Egyptian security officials traveled to Tripoli to meet with representatives of the GNA⁴. In 2021, however, el-Sisi met with Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in Cairo. During this meeting, the Egyptian president expressed his support for the new interim government in Tripoli. All these events do not presuppose an upheaval in Egyptian diplomacy, but they still represent an important turning point. This is why when Haftar refused to meet publicly with then GNA Prime Minister al-Serraj in Cairo in 2017 and when he later refused to accept the truce proposed by Russia in 2020, conflicts with Egypt arose. Haftar not only refused the truce but even decided to bomb parts of western Libya. It was in fact Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who asked him not to give in, as they were acting in an anti-Turkish capacity. Indeed, the two countries want to hinder the Muslim Brotherhood because it is based on a participatory and popular model, thus the opposite of that of the Gulf monarchies (Savina, 2020). El-Sisi therefore triggered black-mails against Haftar, which consisted of diplomatic sanctions. The moderate line finally prevailed, so the Russian and Egyptian line, which led to a truce in October 2020.

Tunisia's situation is different from that of Egypt and Libya. The country after independence was initially characterized by a one-party regime based on the ideology of nationalism. It then became immediately personalistic under Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, given the long tenure of both leaders in power (Fossati, 2018b). Fossati indicates that as much as, in fact, parties played an important role in the struggle for independence, they remained almost always too weak. For this reason, the country was often characterized by regimes controlled by a "lone" man in charge. In 2010, however, the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia it-

self, thanks to those uprisings the country undertook a transition to democracy (it would be the only democracy, albeit limited, in North Africa until 2021). In 2019, President Kaïs Saïed was elected with 72.71 percent and although he presented himself as an independent candidate, he was supported by the left and the moderate Islamic party Ennahda (which won the elections after the fall of Ben Ali in 2011). However, the party increasingly struggled to stay in power over the years, certainly because it never became as strong as the Egyptian Brotherhood, but also because the country was suffering from severe poverty and a severe economic crisis. The government was incapable of handling the situation, which led to numerous popular demonstrations. Taking advantage of the situation, on July 25, 2021 Saïed dissolved the parliament, suspended most of the 2014 constitution, deprived the prime minister of power, and began governing through presidential decrees (justifying this on the basis of Article 80 of the Constitution). El-Sisi supported the Tunisian president from the start, claiming his was a move that could return Tunisia to stability. Moreover, supporting Saïed's actions and, thus, the removal of the Ennahda party, allowed el-Sisi to once again support the inability of Islamic parties to deal with politics (Saied, 2021). The Egyptian president has, in fact, always spoken out against the Tunisian party, even if only diplomatically, as he considers it as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood⁵. Egyptian autocracy promotion in Tunisia, therefore, is manifested through rewards, represented mainly by diplomatic support, but also by an increasing development of bilateral cooperation between the countries. An additional form of support was recorded by Middle East Eye prior to Saïed's July 2021 coup, when some members of the Egyptian security advised the Tunisian president (there was thus intelligence help).

⁵ Nadhif, A. (2021, April 15). Tunisia courts Egypt amid presidential dispute with Islamist Ennahda party. Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/tunisia-courts-egypt-amid-presidential-dispute-islamist-annahda-party>.

It should also be noted that the dynamics involving Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey were also seen in Tunisia. The first two countries support Saïed, so much so that they are increasingly funding him (Fruganti, 2022); Turkey, on the other hand, supports the political party Ennahda, as it echoes some of the values of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In April 2021, Saïed traveled to Cairo for a meeting with el-Sisi: the two presidents discussed their cooperation and re-

gional issues, including Libya (ANSA, 2021). It is important to affirm that Tunisia supports Dbeibah's National Unity Government, opposes external military interference in the country, and pushes for an intralibial dialogue (Fruganti, 2022).

Subsequently, in July 2022 Saïed organized a constitutional referendum aimed at replacing the 2014 constitution with one that could strengthen the president's powers. The referendum was approved with 94 percent of the vote and provided for a hyper-presidential system and the elimination of the system of checks and balances. The problem that arose was that only about 30 percent of the eligible voters voted, but since there was no quorum, the result was deemed valid. It is also important to mention that the Tunisian president modified the draft presented to him by the commission charged with writing the new constitution so that he could add some points in his favor (Boccardi, Rocchetti, & Fruganti, 2022). The jurist heading the commission immediately disassociated himself from the new text, expounding his fear that such a constitution could lead to a dictatorial regime, also given the weakening of the judiciary. After the referendum, Egypt again came out in favor of Saïed, while actors such as the United States and the European Union criticized him (Boccardi et al., 2022). Indeed, in mid-August 2022, President el-Sisi congratulated Saïed on the new constitution⁶. The rapprochement between el-Sisi and Saïed is also given by the latter's growing ties with the armed forces, which supported the president in the coup in July 2021. Although, in fact, the Tunisian armed forces have always been considered a neutral institution, they are gaining more and more power. The military is increasingly using its courts (whose judges are appointed by Saïed himself) to try civilians (Brumberg, 2022). However, further study would be needed on this issue.

⁶) Egypt Today Staff (17 agosto 2022). Egypt congratulates Tunisia on new constitution, affirms solidarity with its people. EgyptToday. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/118456/Egypt-congratulates-Tunisia-on-new-constitution-affirms-solidarity-with-its-people>

In December 2022, the next elections are scheduled, which are likely to be boycotted by some opposition parties, especially Ennahda, as they are considered non-transparent elections also because of the new electoral law enacted by Saïed himself. The latter, in fact, reduces the role of political parties in a parliament that has fewer powers under the new constitution.

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that President el-Sisi has mainly developed the model of rewards and some blackmail. In fact, we find rewards in both Libya and Tunisia, while blackmail

only against Marshal Haftar. The main difference of Egyptian autocracy promotion in the two countries, however, lies in the fact that in Libya there are strong military rewards, such as training the armed forces and selling weapons (although military interventions are only indirect). This is obviously caused by the fact that there has been a war in Libya. On the other hand, as far as economic rewards are concerned, these are scarce in both Libya and Tunisia because Egypt is not a rich country (in terms of oil exports, for example). In Tunisia the rewards have been weaker than in Libya: they have been mainly diplomatic. It is therefore possible to come to the conclusion that there has been mainly an emulation of Saïed toward Egypt.

Egypt's autocracy promotion according to Fossati's typology

Wanting to place Egyptian autocracy promotion in Libya in the table based on Fossati's (2022) typology, it is possible to say that it occupies two boxes. When el-Sisi supports Haftar, he develops a rigid autocracy promotion with soft power relations, because it is directed only toward the authoritarian government of the Marshal of Cyrenaica, but without direct military actions. Subsequently, there is the beginning of Egypt's collaboration with Russia and Turkish intervention in Libya. Given Erdogan's role, el-Sisi develops a more moderate policy and begins to negotiate with the government in Tripoli. At this stage autocracy promotion is flexible with soft power relations as there is rapprochement with al-Serraj's hybrid regime. Finally, there is the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which develop a more radical policy in Libya than Egypt. As we have already outlined, however, in the end the more moderate line prevailed: Libya reached a territorial compromise, which was certainly facilitated by the oil presence in both areas. Thus, there are no differences with reference to the typology.

In Tunisia, on the other hand, el-Sisi's Egypt develops a flexible autocracy promotion, as Saïed's regime is hybrid. Here, too, there are soft power relations, since autocratic promotion is based on rewards, thus, as already mentioned, on diplomatic, economic and intelligence support.

Thus, the boxes representing flexible and rigid autocracy promotion with hard power relations remain empty⁷.

Power	Autocracy promotion	
	Flexible	Rigid
Hard		
Soft	Egypt in Lybia after 2020 Egypt in Lybia after 2020	Egypt in Lybia from 2014 to 2020

Relationship between values and interests in el-Sisi's foreign policy

Finally, it is important to make a final point regarding the cleavage between el-Sisi's values and interests in the two countries considered in this article. Egyptian autocracy promotion is more ideological, although on some occasions interests have also come into play. In Libya, for example, in the first phase of autocracy promotion, so when el-Sisi only supports Marshal Haftar, he is more ideological: he wants to build a strong bond between the Egyptian and Libyan militaries. In the second phase, on the other hand, values are combined with interests; el-Sisi, in fact, moderates his position and begins to negotiate with the Tripoli government as well. In the third phase, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the UAE rely on values, in an anti-Turkish function. It is therefore noteworthy that in al-Sisi's autocracy promotion in Libya, interests never prevail on ideology, otherwise he would have abandoned Haftar in order to gain advantages from the Tripoli government (with advantages in oil deals, for example).

On the other hand, regarding the value-interest cleavage in Tunisia, it is possible to affirm that the Egyptian president's support is ideological: he supports his Tunisian counterpart mainly to have an accomplice against political Islam. Indeed, interests would come into play only in the case of a record of negotiations with Ennahda, a step that according to my research has not yet occurred. There may perhaps be some developments in the future, so further investigation will be necessary.

⁷ As mentioned earlier, Egypt also develops autocracy promotion towards Sudan. However, during my research I deliberately chose to exclude Sudan, as it is a country with different economic, political, and cultural characteristics from those of North Africa. Therefore, the comparison would have been too complicated. In Sudan there were popular protests in 2018 that led to the fall of the personalistic regime of al-Bashir and then to the military coup of al-Burhan in April 2019. A difficult transition with a mixed military-civilian government is now underway, but the regime cannot yet be considered free, in part because the armed forces continue to play a strong role in the country. El-Sisi has supported Sudan's military, albeit indirectly, but placing Sudan in Fossati's typology would require extensive empirical research.

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