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## Egypt army chief shows political agility in crisis

By Yasmine Saleh

8/8/2013

CAIRO: For a man who says he doesn't want to be president, Egypt's army chief is proving to be a skillful politician so far. Since he deposed Islamist President Mohammad Morsi on July 3, General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi has built on a web of contacts he began nurturing after his appointment as army chief last year.

He has met everyone from top religious scholars to writers and youth activists through the crisis unleashed by Morsi's downfall, while juggling sensitive foreign relations with the United States, Europe and Arab allies.

But his close relationship with Mohammad ElBaradei, vice president in the new, army-backed government, could be the one that shapes the outcome of the current standoff with the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's political future.

"Gen. Sisi is meeting ElBaradei regularly and calls him frequently. He appreciates his opinion," an army officer said.

The 58-year-old former military intelligence chief has shown political nous ever since Morsi appointed him last year. One of his first steps was to revamp the army's public relations department that is now helping him to win hearts and minds.

Since Sisi deposed Morsi, his remarks have shown that he was studying Egyptian politics as closely as anyone. They have also revealed deep suspicion bordering on hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood that could shape the outcome of the crisis.

Thousands of supporters of the Brotherhood have been staging protests in two areas of Cairo for more than a month against Sisi's overthrow of Morsi, demanding the reinstatement of the elected president.

The army chief has said the Brotherhood was more interested in restoring a transnational Islamic empire than in the Egyptian nation – a charge denied by the group but widely voiced among its harshest critics.

In his only interview since the takeover, Sisi alleged that Morsi allowed terrorists to enter Egypt, fueling rising militancy in Sinai on the ultrasensitive border with Israel.

He also described the Brotherhood as a minority of 5 to 10 percent seeking to impose its views on all Egyptians.

“It was always in their minds that they have the exclusive truth and the exclusive rights,” he told the Washington Post. “A major part of their culture is to work secretly underground.”

Targeting his message to the breakfast table of uneasy U.S. policymakers, Sisi said: “The title of the article should be ‘Hey America: Where is your support for Egypt? Where is your support for free people?’”

Sisi's antipathy toward the Brotherhood may influence efforts to lure the group off the street and back into politics. But the relationship with ElBaradei appears to have brought an element of moderation into the army chief's approach.

“The army wanted to end the Brotherhood's sit-ins fast and in any way,” said one security source.

“But it was forced to wait after it felt that a likely eruption of violence during the evacuation could trigger strong reaction from the West or lead some in government to resign,” the source said, in reference to ElBaradei among others.

Suggesting he has Sisi's ear, the Nobel Prize winner has said that the general understands the need for a political solution, which ElBaradei has been championing.

A political source close to ElBaradei said the former U.N. nuclear agency chief was not happy with a violent crackdown on the Brotherhood and was working closely with Sisi to bring it to an end.

The army chief turned to ElBaradei because he sees him as a “decent, honest man with international experience” said an army colonel close to Sisi, suggesting the vice president may continue to wield influence.

“This is what we need for this period, those are the kind of people Egypt needs,” said the colonel.

Underscoring their close ties, it was ElBaradei who first said Sisi was not interested in becoming president, answering one of the biggest questions about his political ambition.

But even if he doesn’t run for office, Sisi sees the army remaining at the heart of Egyptian affairs.

From the moment Morsi appointed him last August, Sisi “foresaw the army being a national independent establishment that will need to have a role in Egypt’s politics,” the colonel said.

This was “not to come back to power but might need to help out at certain difficult stages,” he said.

By seeking consensus early on, Sisi is trying to avoid the mistakes of the generals who ruled after veteran autocrat Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in an Arab Spring uprising in 2011.

“Gen. Sisi reacted upon the will of the people and did not do that solely but brought on board many public figures and politicians which was a very wise move,” said Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, political science professor at Cairo University.

Sisi has worked hard to improve the image of the army which was damaged by economic stagnation, indecision and alleged human rights abuses by security forces during its 17 months in power after Mubarak’s fall.

In a departure from the days of his elderly predecessor Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, Sisi appointed a telegenic military spokesman to head up PR.

After dozens of Morsi’s supporters were gunned down outside the Republican Guard headquarters, army spokesman Ahmad Ali appeared on television to present video footage of Islamist violence, including masked gunmen shooting at troops, to illustrate the army’s side of the story.

Ali frequently meets journalists dressed in casual clothes and leads a department staffed by youthful officers. Army planes have staged frequent flyovers in Cairo to rally support, and there is even a new Arabic pop song lauding the military role.

Portraits of Sisi in dress uniform with a chest full of medals suddenly flooded the capital after the takeover.

“The general understood the importance of having a strong young leadership in the army as it gives a positive impression about the army being strong and fit,” said the colonel.

“It was understood that Gen. Tantawi had to go, along with others from his era, and fresh blood was needed and that is what he did.”

Sisi was groomed for leadership after serving in top roles in the command, intelligence and diplomatic branches of the armed forces.

Among his previous missions were a stint as defense attache in Saudi Arabia, to which he retains friendly ties, and command posts in the Sinai Peninsula and the northern military region.

Sisi is described as a pious man whose wife wears the full-face veil, known as the niqab.

Ideas espoused in a paper he wrote at the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania in 2005-2006 have been cited as evidence of Islamist leanings.

But those who know Sisi say he is no Islamist.

Sherifa Zuhur a former research professor at the Strategic Studies Institute within the Army War College who knew Sisi while he was there described him as quiet, well-spoken and very well informed about historical issues, including Islamic history.

“Just as the vast number of ordinary Egyptian Muslims are pious, so too was Sisi, but not more so than my husband or in-laws,” Zuhur wrote in a blog post.