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Egypt's military chief attracts personality cult after he ousted Islamist president in coup

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In dark sunglasses and a uniform studded with medals, Egypt's top general is everywhere, looking down from posters and banners proclaiming him "lion of the nation." Adoring songs vow "We are behind you."

Barely a month after he removed the elected president, Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi is riding a wave of adulation, drawing comparisons between him and modern Egypt's first charismatic strongman, former President Gamal Abdel-Nasser. State media and pro-military TV channels and newspapers have done everything they can to fuel the fervour.

But some warn that the personality cult could pave the way to new authoritarianism after a coup that the army and its supporters insist was aimed at promoting democracy.

"I worry about el-Sissi and the possible arrogance of the victor. And I fear him if he decides that the army is stronger than any future president that he will control like a puppet," wrote Mohammed Fathy, a columnist in the newspaper Al-Watan. "The admiration for him has gone beyond normal levels and is now more like deifying him."

The hype has swelled to the point that some are convinced el-Sissi will take off his uniform and run for president in elections due to take place early next year. A military spokesman denied el-Sissi has any intention to do so. That has done nothing to end the speculation by those for and against the idea.

"Bottom line, el-Sissi will be president because he has no choice but to be. People have already started treating him as such and because he is de facto ruler," Fathy wrote in a column on Monday, adding that media are depicting the general as "Nasser 2013."

The raving over el-Sissi is rooted in the satisfaction many Egyptians took from his July 3 coup removing President Mohammed Morsi. It came after four days of massive protests by millions nationwide demanding the president step down, accusing him of failing to manage the country and handing power over to his Islamist allies.

The nationalist fervour and resentment of the Islamists has so far all but drowned out arguments by Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi's other supporters that the coup against Egypt's first freely elected president has wrecked democracy. Two large-scale killings of dozens of pro-Morsi protesters in clashes the past three weeks have won them little sympathy amid a public attitude — again fueled by the military, officials and many media outlets — that the protesters are violent extremists.

But the lavish celebration of el-Sissi also speaks of a nation looking for a leader it can rally behind. It underscores a close bond between the Egyptian public and the armed forces. As a mostly conscript army, there is hardly an Egyptian family that hasn't sent a son to the military, which fought four wars with Israel — the most recent in 1973.

That translates into a trust of the army's intentions among many.

"The army will not stay forever, just long enough to restore order and security in the country," said Ezzat Fahim, a 38-year-old father of two. He carried an el-Sissi poster in Cairo's Tahrir Square during massive nationwide rallies on Friday that the general himself called for as a show of support for the military to act against "terrorism."

The degree of trust has survived among much of the public despite the fact that the generals were the power behind the scenes during six decades of authoritarian rule. Hosni Mubarak, ousted in the 2011 uprising after 29 years in power, was a career air force officer.

The military ruled directly for nearly 17 months after Mubarak's fall until Morsi was inaugurated — a period that bruised the generals' image, with anti-military protests in the streets and accusations of abuses by troops. Some believe that after that experience, el-Sissi will be wary of seeming to hold too much power.

"So far, I am not worried of him seizing power," said Mohammed Hashem, a leftist book publisher and veteran pro-democracy campaigner. "I see no signs that he is tempted to do so. If he does, I will be out on the streets again shouting 'down, down with military rule'."

But the el-Sissi-fest is powerful, seemingly rooted in part in a desire for a charismatic nationalist figure.

Morsi, the country's first president not to come from the military, was unable to create that image, with his Islamist agenda appealing only few outside his base. Mubarak sorely lacked

charisma and a human touch and was seen as building up a regime based on cronyism and corruption and the power of oppressive police agencies.

The yearning could explain the rampant comparisons to Nasser.

Nasser, a military officer, was the mastermind of a 1952 coup that toppled the monarchy. As president, Nasser was lionized for nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956, negotiating the withdrawal of occupying British forces, dismantling the feudal agricultural system and spreading free education. When he died in 1970, millions participated in the funeral.

Since his death, many acknowledge his faults: His rule was oppressive against both secular and Islamist dissidents, and the state-run system he created decayed into corruption. But there is also nostalgia for what was seen as good in him.

That worries some.

"The notion of someone becoming the saviour and hero of a nation as big and ancient as Egypt is a big mistake," prominent rights campaigner Gamal Eid warned.

El-Sissi, he said, "knows fully well that people are inclined to trust those who are sincere even if they don't approve of what they do."

The sort of enthusiasm for the 58-year-old el-Sissi has not been seen since Nasser's heyday in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the huge crowds that came out for Friday's rally, many waved posters juxtaposing pictures of el-Sissi and Nasser. "Buy the picture of el-Zaeem," shouted one woman selling el-Sissi posters, using the Arabic word for "leader" exclusively associated in Egypt with Nasser.

Protesters wore around their necks small portraits of el-Sissi next to a lion symbolizing strength. One poster had him smiling and in his hallmark dark sunglasses with the words: "El-Sissi, the love of the people."

Protesters drew a giant portrait of el-Sissi with green laser beams on the side of a high-rise hotel overlooking Tahrir.

Ghada Shereef, in an op-ed piece Thursday in the independent Al-Masry Al-Youm, gushed that if el-Sissi gave the word, women would line up to marry him or just be his concubines. "That is a man who is adored by Egyptians," she wrote in the article, titled "El-Sissi, just wink to get what you want."

Previously the head of military intelligence, el-Sissi was little known outside the army when Morsi appointed him defence minister and head of the armed forces last August. Morsi's aides have said they saw him as a pious Muslim who had shown signs of sympathy with their Islamist agenda.

As army chief, however, he's shown no political agenda in any direction.

But he has cultivated a unique charisma for a military man. Unlike the usual stern-faced generals, el-Sissi has shown an emotional side, a quality many of his fans cite as proof of his compassion.

On Sunday, he sat at a police graduation ceremony fighting back tears as the commander of the police academy waxed lyrical on his patriotism. The army's propaganda machine has also been marketing him as a youthful and energetic leader. Army videos show el-Sissi jogging in camouflage fatigues along with other commanders, or warmly chatting with soldiers during war games.

It's a stark contrast to his near-mummified predecessor, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the Mubarak-era defence minister who ruled Egypt for nearly 17 months until Morsi was inaugurated and soon after removed him.

El-Sissi has invited celebrities to army-sponsored functions. At a live concert in April, he held the microphone like a pop singer to address the audience.

"I want to say something to you: Don't ever worry about Egypt," he said. "Egyptians can change the whole world when they want." The singers and dancers who had just finished their show broke into chants of "the army and the people are one hand."