

## **The Signs of a Strongman: A Semiotic and Discourse Analysis of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's Egyptian Presidential Campaign**

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This study employs semiotic analysis to examine the sign system in two of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's 2014 Egyptian presidential campaign posters, and discourse analysis to uncover dominant discourses in Al-Sisi's most prominent campaign video. The semiotic analysis finds that the campaign presented Al-Sisi as a familiar, yet transcendent, figure, and the discourse analysis suggests that the video producers discursively constructed Al-Sisi as the ultimate patriot and a strongman with immense leadership abilities.

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In one sense, Egyptian society, like all societies, is constituted of signs. "The world is full of signs," as Roland Barthes (1995) famously explained. In Egypt, like everywhere else, symbols, images, words, objects, and gestures contain layered meanings, offering important insights into culture, subcultures, and dominant ideology.

The fast rise of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi, Egypt's sixth president, has been examined extensively from political science and sociological perspectives, with analyses focusing on Al-Sisi's economic policy (El Dahsan, 2014), the potentially deleterious effects of Al-Sisi's presidency on Egyptian democracy (Fadel, 2014), the role of the Egyptian military in Egyptian politics (Hauslohner, 2014), and Egypt's "deep state" (Woertz, 2014). The research presented in this article focuses on significant and hitherto unexamined areas—the sign system and discursive pattern that both fostered and reflected Al-Sisi's popularity around the time of his election in spring 2014. In a period of just three years, Al-Sisi went from a position of obscurity inside President Hosni Mubarak's intelligence apparatus to one of enormous notoriety.

Almost as soon as they had taken to the streets in 2011 to protest against Mubarak's 30-year presidency, Egyptians, in summer 2013, again organized large protests to remove a leader—Mohamed Morsi, who had been elected president just one year earlier. The 2013 removal of President Morsi,

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however, was, in important ways, different from the 2011 ousting of Mubarak. Since Morsi was elected in a free and fair election, political scientists considered the change of power a military coup d'état and a blow to the Egyptian experiment with democracy (Dunne, 2013; Falk, 2013; Feldman, 2013; Goldberg, 2014; Hamid, 2013; Hamid & Mandaville, 2013). Egyptians who participated in the protests, however, considered the events to be a popular revolution and were offended by suggestions that what happened was a coup ("El-Sisi Wins," 2014; "Opposition: Removing Morsy," 2013; Powers, 2013).

Al-Sisi, a high-ranking military officer who ousted Morsi after having served as his defense minister for nearly a year, was instantly catapulted to popularity. He became an overnight hero to millions of Egyptians who were happy to see Morsi, an Islamist hailing from the Muslim Brotherhood, leave office.

Although Al-Sisi's popularity was exaggerated by his supporters and the Egyptian media—empirical data suggest that, months after the events of summer 2013, nearly 50% of Egyptians were opposed to the change in power (Pew Research Center, 2014; Zogby Research Services, 2013)—there is no denying that millions of Egyptians saw Al-Sisi as a national hero who had rescued Egyptians from political disaster.

Within weeks of Al-Sisi's ousting of Morsi, a type of "Sisi-mania"—as *The New York Times's* Liam Stack (2013) would call it—overtook large swaths of Egyptian society. Stack documented the production of new Al-Sisi chocolate bars, jewelry, and sandwiches and cites an essay in one of Egypt's state-run newspapers describing Al-Sisi as a man whose "freshly washed countenance and youthful zeal shield a herculean strength of steel" and who "wears the feathers of a dove but has the piercing eyes of a hawk" (para. 2).

Other reports have described Al-Sisi's "cult" following, which includes numerous billboards and posters bearing his image; military-themed weddings; Al-Sisi portraits; military cups, flags, and pins; portrayals of Al-Sisi as a superhero; and the likening of Al-Sisi to a Prophet of God (Kurzman, 2014). Al-Sisi's image among supporters appeared unaffected by what Human Rights Watch described as state-sponsored repression—including a series of mass killings (Human Rights Watch, 2014c), mass arrests (Human Rights Watch, 2014a), and mass death sentences (Human Rights Watch, 2014b)—carried out in 2013 and 2014. Al-Sisi's popularity was reflected in the results of Egypt's May 2014 presidential election, which was won convincingly. In a vote that international observers said was marred by the effective elimination of serious competition and low overall turnout (Kirkpatrick, 2014), Al-Sisi dominated his lone contender, Hamdeen Sabbahi, taking nearly 97% of the vote ("El-Sisi Wins," 2014). More than 20 million Egyptians voted for Al-Sisi.

It is Al-Sisi's cult following that is the focus of this research, which employs both semiotic analysis and discourse analysis. In particular, this research focuses on Al-Sisi's campaign for president, launched in early 2014. The campaign drew from the common stock of Al-Sisi images circulating in the Egyptian media sphere and offers a rich set of material for study. This article adds an important element to the literature on semiotics and discourse, which have, until now, neglected Arabic textual productions. The study also offers insights into how the semiotic and discursive constructions of Al-Sisi may have contributed to his popularity.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Semiotics*

The field of semiotics was cofounded by U.S. philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to study signs in all their forms—including terms, pictures, sounds, motions, and objects—with the goal of interpreting meanings and assessing the extent to which reality is represented in signs (Chandler, 2007). Any sign may be a product of multiple realities, depending on the readers' interpretations of the sign and the context(s) in which it is interpreted. "Therefore, it may distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view" (Volosinov, 1986, p. 10).

A semiological approach can be highly complex, given the abundance of signs in any particular object or message and the multifaceted meanings inherent within them. In this context, Barthes (1988) argued that "To decipher the world's signs always means to struggle with a certain innocence of objects. We all understand our language so 'naturally' that it never occurs to us that it is an extremely complicated system" (p. 158). Barthes studied mythological signs from a macro perspective by looking at amalgamations of signs from broad sociocultural perspectives (McFall, 2004).

Following the Peircean model, "a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Eco, 1984, p. 14). From this perspective, a sign is a combination of three elements: the "object," what is represented in a sign; the "representamen," the way it is represented; and the "interpretant," the way it is interpreted (Chandler, 2007). Following the Saussurean model, the process of studying the representations and interpretations embedded within signs requires understanding signification, or the connection between the "signifier" (expression) and the "signified" (content) (Eco, 1984). Barthes (1988) explained that the signifier is the "coordinate of classification, or the taxonomic coordinate," while the signified is the "symbolic" coordinate that has "metaphorical depth" (p. 183).

Related to the signification process is the denotative-connotative dimension, which helps the reader of a sign interpret its meaning(s). Denotation is the overt, literal, or explicit meaning of a sign, while connotation is the figurative, implied, and more nuanced meaning (Berger, 2005). From a rhetorical point of view, "It is important for the purposes of interpretation to know not just what is said (denotation), but how it is said (connotation)" (Hall, 2012, p. 134).

Signification does not capture all the complexities or nuances of a linguistic or visual sign since "the sign derives its value also from its surroundings" (Barthes, 1977, p. 48). It is critical to study the sociopolitical environment in which a sign is conceived and interpreted to assess not just the meanings in a sign but the ideological, social, and political conditions where these meanings are sustained (Thompson, 1984).

According to Halliday (1978), the semiotic representation of any social context entails three conceptual dimensions or metafunctions: the field serving an experiential or ideational metafunction (the nature and description of the activity); the tenor serving an interpersonal metafunction (the relationships and interactions among the participants in the activity); and the mode serving a textual metafunction (the

rhetorical channel or the medium through which the activities are shown). These three dimensions determine the semantic configuration and rhetorical patterns of a social context.

In the process of analyzing a semiotic text by using these three dimensions, one must account for the syntagmatic environment (the "semantic context" or the "semiotic construct . . . [that] can be treated as a constant for the text as a whole, but is in fact constantly changing, each part serving in turn as environment for the next") and the paradigmatic environment ("the ongoing text-creating process [that] continually modifies the system" in which it is embedded) (Halliday, 1978, p. 139).

Semiotics, as a theoretical and methodological tool, has been criticized for lacking objectivity and generating incomprehensible, vague, and ungeneralizable findings. This may be caused by a high level of dependence on "the impressionistic insights of individual analysts, with varying abilities to reach the deeper levels of meaning construction" (McFall, 2004, p. 23). Another criticism of semiotics is that it is sometimes hard for sign analysts to figure out how meanings are negotiated in particular social contexts. This may result from "excessive abstraction" and overemphasizing nuanced textual meanings while neglecting the real contexts in which meanings are created (McFall, 2004).

An essential component of semiotics is its emphasis on visual structures and meanings of images. Visual semiotics studies images' denotative and connotative meanings and what they represent. It also entails iconography by investigating the cultural context in which the image is conceived and how the visual extensions of this context come into being (van Leeuwen, 2014). Because visual meaning has no specific boundaries, linguistic messages are sometimes used to bestow a "definite meaning" on an image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18). The text-image combination lends itself to the study of visual lexis, syntax, and structure.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) extended Halliday's three metafunctions by using different terms than those used by Halliday: "representational," meaning in place of ideational metafunction; "interactive," meaning in place of interpersonal metafunction; and "compositional," meaning in place of textual metafunction (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014).

### ***Discourse Theory***

In addition to semiotics, this study is grounded in discourse theory. According to Kress (1985), discourse refers to "specific ways or modes of talking about certain areas of social life" (p. 28).

Much of social reality is not given, but is constructed and provided meaning through social discourse (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Dell'Orto, 2002). Importantly, texts are the domain of discourse and represent a key site in meaning production (Kress, 1985). As Kress (1985) notes, "discourse finds its expression in text" (p. 27).

Discourses, as expressed through texts, are deeply ingrained within the sociocultural system and are powerful because they are linked to dominant ideology and culture (Hall, 1986). Discourses are at

their most powerful when they achieve a type of hegemonic status—that is, when they appear natural and commonsense-like (Karim, 2000).

Many scholars have used discourse theory and analysis to examine how dominant ideologies have been reinforced and maintained through elaborate discursive constructions. For example, Foucault (1990) argued that in the 18th and 19th centuries, key Western institutions—including medicine, science, and religion—constructed discourses about gender and sexuality that were used to control the boundaries of sex.

Goldhagen (1996) posited that discourses demonizing Judaism were constructed in Nazi Germany and contributed ultimately to the willingness of ordinary German citizens to support and participate in the holocaust against the Jews. Also, Said (1978/1994) argued that a series of European-produced discursive formations about Islam relegated Muslims to foreign, strange, and dangerous “others” in Western societies.

Discursive constructions are not produced in vacuums and do not arise out of nothingness. Their production is, rather, linked with cultural context, social structure, and historical circumstance (Smith, 1990). Smith describes the importance of text thus:

Texts are situated in and structure social relations (extended social courses of action) in which people are actively at work. Texts enter into and order courses of action and relations among individuals. The texts themselves have a material presence and are produced in an economic and social process which is part of a political economy. (p. 162)

Discourse, then, focuses on the social production of meaning and on text as the key site of that production process. Discourse theory is an appropriate conceptual framework for this study’s discourse analysis because it can facilitate an explanation of the deep meanings of texts produced in the Al-Sisi campaign video under examination.

### **Method**

We used two methods to analyze the visual components of the campaign launched by Al-Sisi in his May 2014 bid for the Egyptian presidency: a visual semiotic analysis to examine two campaign posters and discourse analysis to uncover the discursive constructions of the longer of two videos produced by the campaign.

#### ***Visual Semiotic Analysis***

Posters often lend themselves to semiotic analysis “because of their high degree of visual impact and visibility. . . . A poster aims to arrest, hold, persuade, implant an idea and give specific information” (Teo, 2004, pp. 189–190). Most of the posters that were hung up in Egyptian streets to endorse Al-Sisi were created by his supporters among the general public (El-Deeb, 2014). Of the few posters that were

designed by Al-Sisi's campaign, we selected two that reflected a diverse set of semiotic dimensions and that included both images of Al-Sisi and text.

Our visual semiotic analysis employed Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three dimensions of interpreting meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional. Representational meaning refers to the syntactic patterns—which are either conceptual or narrative—in an image. "Where conceptual patterns represent participants . . . in terms of their generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, narrative patterns serve to present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements" (p. 59).

Interactive meaning refers to the interactions between viewers of an image and the contact, distance, and point of view of elements and participants in that image. Contact includes "demand" images, where the participants use symbolic expressions and/or gestures to demand something from the viewer, and "offer" images, where participants are displayed in a detached and disengaging manner, as if they are just offering information. Distance examines the "intimacy" implications of close-up shots, medium shots, and long shots of participants. Point of view refers to the angles used in an image—frontal angles imply attachment to the viewer, and high and vertical angles suggest power over the viewer (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014).

Compositional meaning refers to four elements: information value (the placement of visual elements in an image; e.g., left versus right, top versus bottom, and center versus margins); framing (elements in an image can be connected as one continuous unit or disconnected through frame lines and/or empty space); salience (some elements in an image can stand out to the viewers' eyes more than others); and modality (the extent to which an image is close to reality; e.g., photos are more real than drawings) (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014).

In applying Kress and van Leeuwen's representational, interactive, and compositional meanings to the two posters that we selected from Al-Sisi's campaign, we examined how Al-Sisi was portrayed syntactically through particular narrative structures, such as facial expressions, body movements, and hand gestures. We also analyzed the distance and angles of Al-Sisi's shots and the symbolic implications of the angles used. For example, a frontal angle with a close-up, eye-level shot is more intimate than a side angle with a long shot (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In addition, we analyzed the size of the verbal messages used in the two posters and the placement and salience of visual elements, such as slogans, flags, and text with bold type. In this context, we examined the use of dividing lines between the various elements portrayed in the posters to see whether they are visually represented as a continuum. Finally, we examined the two posters' levels of brightness and degree of depth, aspects that are considered important because they carry the potential to impact viewers' visual perceptions of the foreground (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

### ***Discourse Analysis***

We also employed discourse analysis to examine the longer of two campaign videos produced by Al-Sisi. Through closely reading and examining texts—and situating them within larger sociopolitical

contexts—discourse analysis seeks to identify and explain both manifest and latent meanings of texts (van Dijk, 1991). Van Dijk explains: “Discourse analysis specifically aims to show how the cognitive, social, historical, cultural or political contexts of language use and communication impinge on the contents, meanings, structures or strategies of text or dialogue” (p. 45).

Importantly, discourses are often produced and maintained by social elites and reflect dominant ideology and culture (Hall, 1986). This is important, because, as Meyers (2004), explains, “Although any number of interpretations are possible given the polysemic nature of texts, some discourses are privileged and most likely to shape meaning because they carry the weight of cultural assumptions and expectations” (p. 96). In carrying out our discourse analysis, we attempted to situate video texts produced by the Al-Sisi campaign within the domains of dominant Egyptian ideology and culture.

The video we analyzed is about eight minutes long; the shorter video, which we excluded from analysis, is just 56 seconds long. We chose to analyze the longer video because of its richer content and the rhetorical symbolism reflected in several of the production’s quotes.<sup>1</sup> Our discourse analysis attempted to situate the video text(s) within the larger context of Egypt’s sociopolitical realities. Contextualization constitutes an important part of discourse analysis, because “texts do not ‘have’ [given] meanings, but are assigned meanings,” partly on the basis of social contexts and settings (van Dijk, 1991, pp. 116–117).

According to Fairclough (2003), analyzing texts requires “seeing [them] in terms of different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together” (p. 3). This methodological approach aims to decipher and interpret meaning(s) in a text. This “meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit—what is assumed” (p. 11). This interpretation entails various dimensions, ranging from “understanding what words or sentences or longer stretches of text mean . . . [to] judging whether someone is saying something sincerely or not, or seriously or not” (p. 11).

According to Hall (1975), the process of identifying and interpreting meanings in a text necessitates multiple close readings of the text within the context of the study’s framework. We watched and analyzed the video together, collectively identified patterns of connotations and denotations, reflected on dominant patterns, and, ultimately, negotiated a common understanding of the discursive meanings embedded in the video. We paid close attention to the symbolism of specific images invoked in the video, word choice, internal structure and placement, production techniques, chosen characters, on-screen dialogue, background music and song lyrics, and the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which the video was produced.

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<sup>1</sup> The video can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1Ps0FDek3M#t=132>.

### Results: Semiotic Analysis of Campaign Posters

#### Poster 1

The first poster that we analyzed (see Figure 1) is a snapshot showing Al-Sisi walking with one arm slightly ahead of the other. It is a "narrative representation," which, according to Jewitt and Oyama (2014), portrays "participants in terms of 'doings' and 'happenings.'" A snapshot "tries to capture specific moments in time" (Teo, 2004, p. 196), and the participants portrayed in a snapshot are often "depicted as doing something or behaving in a particular way" (Teo, 2004, p. 204). Narrative structures are characterized by the existence of visual "vectors" or "action verbs" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In this poster, Al-Sisi is shown moving toward the viewer, with a determined and confident expression on his face that suggests action and dynamism.



**Figure 1. Al-Sisi campaign poster showing him in a snapshot.**

Al-Sisi's gaze is directly upon the viewer in a manner that implies "demand." This gaze "creates a visual form of direct address. It acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual 'you'" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 31). In the context of this poster, Al-Sisi demands action from his viewers. He is looking directly at the viewers, as if he is calling them to rally behind him, to vote for him and formally cement his role as leader.

In this image, Al-Sisi has a smile that exudes both confidence and affability. It is the smile of an individual who is already a leader and who is ready to assume his role as president, but with the support of his people. His smile also implies unity, cohesion, and shared goals with the viewers. In this context, Teo (2004) argued that "The smiling faces . . . send a highly positive signal to the reader . . . , create a tenor of friendliness and interact with the interpersonal features . . . to create a sense of intimacy and solidarity with the reader" (p. 196).



In terms of angle and distance, Al-Sisi's image is a medium close-up shot, suggesting a combination of intimate and social relationships (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014). "The 'distance' of participants in an image is significant in indicating the degree of intimacy invited between the subject matter and the viewer" (Bell, 2012, p. 7). Al-Sisi's image has a frontal angle that shows his head, shoulders, and part of his arms. "The frontal angle is the angle of maximum involvement. It is oriented toward action" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 145). This is an eye-level shot that implies an intimate, fantasized bond between Al-Sisi and his followers. "When represented participants look at the viewer, vectors, formed by the participants' eyelines, connect the participants with the viewer. Contact is established, even if it is only on an imaginary level" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 117). This friendly visual confrontation suggests a nuanced meaning of symbolic equality and "symmetrical power" (Teo, 2004) where the viewers can identify with Al-Sisi on a personal level. Al-Sisi is the leader, but, subtly, he is one of us. The fact that he is shown with an open-collar shirt and no tie contributes to the sense of equality with viewers.

There is text on the left side of the poster, next to Al-Sisi's image on the right. The verbal message tends to complement the visual signs. In this context, Barthes (1977), as cited in Teo (2004), argued that "images are too polysemous and indefinite by themselves—a floating chain of signifieds—and to properly understand them, language has to come to the rescue" (p. 193).

At the top left-hand side, the slogan "Long live Egypt" is interspersed with the red, white, and black Egyptian flag. It is the boldest and most salient part of the text, and underneath is the text "Abdelfattah Al-Sisi for the Republic's Presidency" in less bold type and smaller font. From the perspective of compositional meaning, the placement of the Egyptian flag and the glorified words about Egypt at the top left-hand corner imply an "ideal" information value that is "presented as 'given' . . . commonsensical and self-evident" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014, p. 148). Egypt comes first. The subjects presented on the right—in this case Al-Sisi's image—are considered "new." "For something to be 'new' means that it is presented as something not yet known and not yet already agreed upon by the viewer or reader, hence as something to which the viewer or reader must pay special attention" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014, p. 148).

It is worth highlighting that there are no framing devices or dividing lines between Al-Sisi on the right and the Egyptian flag and slogan on the left. This type of relational positioning, with images placed on a continuum rather than divided, implies an association between Egypt and Al-Sisi. It suggests "that they belong . . . together in some sense" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). As someone who hails from the military, which represents Egypt, Al-Sisi *is* Egypt. He is part and parcel of the Egyptian society, and a vote for him is a vote for the well-being and prosperity of Egypt, which he stands for and represents.

There is a medium-sized green star on the bottom left-hand corner of the poster, with a text saying that it is the campaign symbol. Al-Sisi and his campaign organizers said (in media interviews) that they selected the star because it symbolizes guidance, implying that Al-Sisi presents himself as the source of light and direction for Egyptians. In this context, the star is a "symbolic production . . . [that aims at] communicating an effective, culturally-bound message by invoking known associations among its readers/viewers" (McIlwain, 1998, p. 173).

The background in this poster contains fuzzy images of trees, which can be seen as a sign of life and hope. The background is blurred, making the viewer focus on the foreground, which seems to be closer to reality or "modality," and which is fully articulated by details of Al-Sisi's face and clothes. The image goes from some abstraction in the background to utmost representation in the foreground. In addition, the high degree of brightness in the foreground and the light-colored suit and shirt that Al-Sisi is wearing are important modality cues that make the participant seem natural and give the viewers a sense of closeness to reality. In this context, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argued that the "use of illumination and brightness is so often invoked as a paradigm example of naturalism" (p. 162). Along the same lines, Teo (2004) argued that

if a photograph is taken in strong light and is sharply focused, it may mean that the photographer wishes to present the subject in the photograph in as natural and life-like a manner as possible, instead of using soft-focus to create a more dream-like state. (p. 196)

### **Poster 2**

The second poster (see Figure 2) showcases a portrait of Al-Sisi's profile that represents a conceptual structure with no vectors. It has a "stable, timeless nature . . . [where] the participants are often shown in a more or less objective, decontextualized way. The background is plain and neutral. Depth is reduced or absent" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79). It is an "offer" image, where "the represented participant is the object of the viewer's dispassionate scrutiny. No contact is made. The viewer's role is that of an invisible onlooker" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119). In this image, Al-Sisi is seemingly unaware he is being looked at. With a gaze not directed at the viewers and a reserved smile on his face, he seems to be offering hope.

In terms of distance and angle, Al-Sisi's image is a close-up shot, showing his head and shoulders and implying an intimate relationship (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014). It is an eye-level shot, suggesting "symbolic equality" with the viewers. The image also has a slight upward angle that reflects an implied sense of power on the part of Al-Sisi. The oblique angle gives a feeling of personal detachment. In this vein, Jewitt and Oyama (2014) argued that "Photographs can symbolically make us relate as an equal to people who in fact have very considerable power over our lives (for example, politicians)" (p. 135). Adding to Al-Sisi's power in this image is his dark navy suit and light blue tie.

As in the first poster, there is text on the left-hand side of this poster, next to Al-Sisi's image on the right. Also like the first poster, this poster includes the slogan "Long live Egypt" interspersed with the Egyptian flag as the boldest item on the top, followed by the less salient "Abdelfattah Al-Sisi for the Republic's Presidency." The green star is featured at the bottom left-hand corner of the poster.

The background in this poster is white, allowing for the subject and items in the foreground to stand out. Al-Sisi's gaze appears to be looking into infinity, but also seems to be fixed on the slogan and the flag. This implies that he is concerned about his country (represented by the flag) and its future (represented by Al-Sisi's gaze into infinity). Even though he is not looking directly at the viewers, Al-Sisi

seems to be preoccupied with their fate. Al-Sisi's gaze toward the flag also suggests that he is a strong, trustworthy, and wise leader who knows what is best for his country.



*Figure 2. Al-Sisi campaign poster showing him in a profile shot.*

As with the first poster, this poster does not have any dividing lines between Al-Sisi (on the right) and the Egyptian flag and slogan (on the left). Egypt is represented in Al-Sisi, and a vote for him is a vote for Egypt.

#### **Discourse Analysis of Campaign Video**

In addition to still images transposed onto fliers and billboards, Al-Sisi's campaign used video appeal. The approximately eight-minute campaign video analyzed here is the longest and most elaborate attempt to use video production to present Al-Sisi to the Egyptian electorate. Because the video features both visual images and audio, it offers powerful insights into Al-Sisi's desired campaign image.

Our discourse analysis uncovered four unique discourses: Egyptian-ness/patriotism, strongman/savior, vitality, and revolutionary. Together, the discourses project an ideal image of Al-Sisi. The discourses are discussed here in turn.

### ***Egyptian-ness/Patriotism***

An *Egyptian-ness/patriotism* discourse—the most comprehensive, pervasive, and layered of all the discourses emerging in the video—is driven home by both visual imagery and audio. The video production is replete with easily identifiable Egyptian symbolism—consistent shots of the Nile River, the Great Pyramids of Giza, historic sites in Old Cairo, the vibrant Corniche of Alexandria, Upper Egypt, Nuba, a popular nationalist song, and well-known Egyptian foods and dress.

Importantly, Al-Sisi never appears in person in the video, and his voice is not heard. Rather, a host of Egyptian citizens speak about him. Overwhelmingly, those chosen to speak on camera are normal, simple, everyday Egyptians—an antique shop owner, one of Al-Sisi's secondary school classmates, a barber, an unknown Nubian man speaking the Nubian dialect, a desert Bedouin, an Upper Egyptian riding a carriage, and an obscure Egyptian woman. These voices serve as a type of testimony to Al-Sisi's patriotism, his Egyptian-ness.

The video employs what van Dijk (1991) calls "implication," a reference to the implicit meanings in texts. According to van Dijk, what is left unsaid can often be as important as that which is explicitly stated. One way to communicate meanings through implication is through "association" (p. 114). By associating Al-Sisi with both prominent Egyptian symbols and ordinary Egyptians, Al-Sisi is set up—by association—as the ultimate Egyptian patriot.

The *Egyptian-ness/patriotism* discourse is also made clear through more explicit means. Two interviews with a pair of Al-Sisi's old acquaintances are particularly forceful. One man, who grew up in the same simple Old Cairo neighborhood in which Al-Sisi was raised, is interviewed in front of Al-Sisi's old family home. He points out the old simple apartment building in which Al-Sisi was raised and says, "He is a president from the ghetto, so he will connect with the poor." During this interview, the camera pans to a shot of the Nile River, and the man says, "We want a leader . . . who knows the nation's boundaries." References to a specific neighborhood, the Nile River, and the nation's boundaries suggest that Al-Sisi is intimately familiar with the nation's sociopolitical and geographic landscape.

One of Al-Sisi's secondary school classmates is interviewed next. He says that Al-Sisi consistently used to tell him that "Egypt is the mother of the world, and it will live up to its potential." The man continues, "This statement comes from deep inside of [Al-Sisi]." The expression "Egypt is the mother of the world" is a well-known Egyptian idiom that reflects Egyptian national pride emanating from Egypt's ancient civilization, something many Egyptians use as evidence of their nation's immense positive contributions to the world.

Shortly after these two interviews, the video presents a shot of the Great Pyramids of Giza and some roaming camels. As the interview voices fade, the lyrics from a nationalist song playing in the background become clearer. The song addresses the "honorable citizen, [the] child of Egypt." The song evokes patriotic feelings in a way that ties Al-Sisi to the country.

Near the end of the video, a man is interviewed. He says, "I am a Nubian. When I elect a president, I choose Al-Sisi." Inclusion of a Black Nubian man is significant because it reflects racial diversity and demonstrates the extension of Al-Sisi's campaign to Egypt's southernmost border with Sudan, where Egypt's Nubia region is located.

The images and sounds associated with some of Egypt's best-known symbols juxtaposed with repeated references to Al-Sisi's loyalty to the nation send a clear message that Al-Sisi is a true Egyptian and a patriot. The fact that simple, everyday Egyptians are interviewed from several of the nation's cities suggests that Al-Sisi represents all Egyptians and all of Egypt.

### ***Strongman***

Another powerful, pervasive discourse emerging from our analysis of the Al-Sisi campaign video suggests that Al-Sisi is a strongman and the ideal person to bring safety and security to a nation suffering from instability and an ongoing security vacuum. This discourse dovetails nicely with the Egyptian-ness/patriotism discourse, particularly because many Egyptians have a penchant for a strong leader—a *za'eem*—regardless of whether the leader governs democratically. At two points, the video zooms in on hanging Sisi posters. Both posters display Sisi wearing his military uniform.

Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt from 1954 to 1970, was a prototypical Arab strongman who, like Sisi, hailed from the military. He oversaw a single-party system, nationalized the press, and imprisoned thousands of his political opponents. Nonetheless, he was seen as a strong leader and a patriot who loved his country. He continues to be popular in Egyptian political circles, with multiple political parties claiming to follow his nationalist platform. Importantly, the campaign video analyzed here made several explicit comparative references to Nasser, suggesting that Al-Sisi was following in his path.

A barber is interviewed about halfway through the video. He says Egypt wants a "strongman" like Nasser. He discusses the Nasser period as though it was a golden era for Egypt. After discussing Nasser, the man says, "Abdel Fattah [is the] strongman."

Shortly after this interview, an outwardly religious fisherman is interviewed. He says, "We want a leader that is going to make us feel safe, and that is going to lead us to the shore." The fisherman continues, "[Al-Sisi] is a patriot who will protect our borders and our nation . . . he doesn't sleep."

Another man interviewed notes that Al-Sisi grew up in the same neighborhood that Nasser grew up in. Yet another man, an antique shop owner from Old Cairo, says that Al-Sisi has "a strong personality" and that people have hopes that he "will relieve them of their suffering."

A desert Bedouin interviewed near the Great Pyramids suggests that Al-Sisi will be able to both revive Egypt's struggling tourism industry and bring about safety and security.

A man riding a carriage in Upper Egypt says, "O my people . . . choose correctly . . . if this rock could speak, it would say, 'choose correctly,' the secret word—for tourism, for the whole world—safety and security and stability—is Abdelfattah Al-Sisi, by the power of God."

A woman interviewed near the end of the video—the only woman appearing in the video—says, "The nation needs a strong leader to protect its institutions and eliminate corruption."

These sections of the video speak to the Egyptian desire for security and stability at a particularly sensitive moment in Egypt's modern history. The speakers' highlighting of Al-Sisi's strength indicates their overwhelming confidence in his ability to protect the country from domestic and foreign threats.

### ***Vitality***

By the time of the 2014 presidential election, Egypt had suffered through more than three years of instability. Crime and unemployment had risen, and wages, safety, and security had decreased. Additionally, by spring 2014, the country had been ravaged by police violence, mass imprisonment, mass arrests, and terrorism. Many of the people who opposed the political order created on July 3, 2013, were either killed in massacres or imprisoned, while the Sinai Peninsula and other areas of the country were beset by terrorism. With some suggesting that Egypt was declining on many fronts and showing little hope for reform, Al-Sisi's campaign chose to emphasize the vibrancy of Egyptian public life. A vitality discourse constituted a prominent undercurrent in the video. Importantly, the video relies on Egyptians' knowledge of their political and social contexts. In this sense, the video relies on what van Dijk (1991) calls "presuppositions"—prior, assumed knowledge of the reader, or viewer.

The video begins with images of a sunrise on the Nile River, quickly cutting to a shot of birds flying. Here, water and flight can be seen as signs of life and vibrancy. After this opening section, the camera offers a glimpse into the hustle and bustle of Cairo's prominent Qasr Al-Nile Bridge. A close-up is shown of two lions on the pillars at the bridge's front. The streets are busy with traffic and are clean and organized.

Shortly after the Qasr Al-Nile Bridge scene, fast cutting shots portray a man shuffling through newspapers and another man preparing fava beans, a staple of the Egyptian diet. Car horns and the voices of people are heard in the background. After these shots, a Qur'anic verse is displayed. It reads: "Eat of that which We have provided for you." The video producers' selection of a verse dealing with sustenance can be seen as an attempt to suggest that Egypt is a place of hope and provision rather than a place of poverty and despair. References to the Qur'an and God may be seen as an attempt by the video's producers to display Al-Sisi's religious side. This is important in a largely conservative, religious nation, and especially given the circumstances surrounding Al-Sisi's rise to political popularity. Some Egyptians may have interpreted the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government as an attack on Islam. The video's religiosity seems to counter that notion.

Later in the video, a man is shown reading the newspaper, suggesting engagement. The man appears interested and involved in his nation, not disengaged. Immediately following this shot, the

camera pans to several youth jogging on a bridge. The young people exercising—with the nationalist song heard clearly in the backdrop—suggest liveliness, strength, and energy.

The production decisions made by the video producers were not haphazard. These images and sounds may be seen as attempts to show an Egypt that is alive and well. They are associated all along with the person of Al-Sisi, suggesting that he has given new life to a struggling nation.

### ***Revolutionary***

Another discourse suggests that Al-Sisi is a revolutionary figure and that his election would be the culmination of the January 25, 2011, revolution that ousted Mubarak. Associating Al-Sisi with the January 25 revolution is important, particularly given the standing of the uprising in post-Mubarak Egypt. In the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, the revolution became synonymous with goodness, progress, and the natural Egyptian identity. All of Egypt's political players—including antidemocratic, antirevolutionary figures—paid homage to "the glorious revolution." Moreover, figures seen as antirevolution or pro-Mubarak were demonized as *felool*, a term concocted to refer to remnants of the Mubarak regime.

Given the place of the January 25, 2011, protest movement in Egyptian politics and society, and also given the controversy surrounding Morsi's 2013 ouster, about which Egyptians were deeply divided, it is not surprising that Al-Sisi's campaign attempted to stake claim to his revolutionary legitimacy.

In multiple places, the video displays Tahrir Square, the site of the largest 2011 anti-Mubarak protests and easily the most recognizable symbol of the 2011 events. At one point, the video shows three young men—clearly meant to represent the revolutionary youth credited with launching the 2011 uprising—walking down the street, revolutionary graffiti exposed on the walls behind them. The young men take turns making obviously scripted remarks. One says, "We joined the revolution to put an end to corruption and to preserve the state's institutions. And this is what we expect from the future president."

The young man's reference to "the revolution" is significant because it represents an explicit link between Al-Sisi and the political events of 2011. Also, the young man did not specify a revolutionary date, leaving open to interpretation whether he is speaking of what many came to call "the glorious January 25 revolution" or what others referred to as "the magnificent June 30 revolution (of 2013)." Importantly, this is consistent with Al-Sisi's framing of the June 30, 2013, anti-Morsi protests, which Al-Sisi proclaimed to be a continuation and completion of the January 2011 protests.

The young man's reference to the goal of preserving "the state's institutions" represents a significant departure from the stated objectives of the January 25, 2011, protest movement. Preserving the state's institutions was not a goal of the January 2011 youth protests, which, in fact, explicitly aimed at dismantling Mubarak-era institutions, most notably the police. Here, then, Al-Sisi's campaign may be attempting to reshape the discourse about revolution in Egypt and, perhaps, suggesting that the military and police are part of the revolution's machinery, not enemies of it.

These production choices—to include young men speaking about the revolution and linking the state's institutions to the revolution—speak to a desire to redefine Al-Sisi as a revolutionary figure whose goals are consistent with the goals of the youth who took to the streets in January 2011 to demand democratic freedoms.

### Discussion

This study employs semiotic analysis to examine the sign system in two of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's 2014 presidential campaign posters, and discourse analysis to uncover dominant discourses in Al-Sisi's most prominent campaign video. The campaign posters presented Al-Sisi as a familiar, yet transcendent, figure. The signs embedded within the posters showed Al-Sisi as "one of us" but, at the same time, a true representative of Egypt capable of guiding the nation through a difficult period.

Our discourse analysis consisted of a close reading of an eight-minute campaign video. Results suggested that the producers of the video discursively constructed Al-Sisi as the ultimate patriot and a strongman with immense leadership abilities. Other discourses associated Al-Sisi with Egypt's 2011 democratic uprising and suggested that Egypt is alive and strong. In immersing ourselves in the video "text," we drew upon our knowledge of the Egyptian political context.

We found significant continuity between the posters and the video. Three of the four discourses uncovered in the discourse analysis—Al-Sisi is a patriot, Al-Sisi is a strong leader, and Egypt is alive and well—overlap with the sign system embedded in the posters, both of which presented Al-Sisi as a representative of the nation and a confident, rightful leader. For example, the video described Al-Sisi as the ultimate patriot and as someone who represented all of Egypt and all Egyptians. The posters took this one step further, implying that Al-Sisi can be considered a stand-in for the nation. In the first poster, in particular, Al-Sisi is set up as the nation, and it is suggested that a vote for him will be a vote for Egypt. The video and the posters can be seen, then, as tapping into Egyptians' love of their country, longing for someone to represent them, and, importantly, admiration for the Egyptian military. The importance of associating Al-Sisi with the military cannot be overstated. As the section on discourse theory makes clear, discourses are firmly established, socially ingrained, and linked with dominant ideology and culture. In Egypt, dominant ideology about the military suggests that it is the ultimate protector and patriot (Collard, 2013); and polling data indicate that Egyptians place more confidence in their military than in any other national institution or political group (Pew Research Center, 2014). Importantly, in the posters and video studied here, Al-Sisi's background with the military was highlighted rather than suppressed.

Importantly, the meanings conveyed by the Al-Sisi campaign were not produced from nothingness. The campaign drew from a particular sociopolitical context and chose messaging that resonated with Egyptians at a historical moment characterized by fear. Most notably, Al-Sisi's rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood figured prominently into his campaign. In particular, presenting Al-Sisi as a strongman and a savior played on fears of the Brotherhood.

Al-Sisi was Egypt's top military official when he removed Morsi, a Brotherhood member, one year into his first term as the country's democratically elected president. In the months that followed the July



3, 2013, military intervention, Egypt's deeply entrenched state institutions—the military, police, judiciary, and media—treated the Brotherhood as an existential threat from which Egyptians required military and police protection. The Brotherhood was banned and declared a terrorist organization, and its charitable organizations were shut down (Cunningham, 2013). Brotherhood members were arrested en masse, and the Egyptian military and police combined to carry out several mass killings against pro-Brotherhood protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Meanwhile, the judiciary issued several mass death sentences against Brotherhood members, and Egypt's obsequious media apparatus covered the country's "war on terror" in propagandistic fashion (Elmasry, 2015), often describing the military and police as heroes and the Brotherhood and their sympathizers as disloyal and criminal. For instance, following a large massacre of pro-Brotherhood protesters at Rabaa Square on August 14, 2013, privately owned Egyptian television news networks described Egyptian police as heroes (Elmasry, 2015). Network OnTV showed police officers maneuvering through Rabaa Square while music from the movie *Rocky* played in the background. Network Faraeen showed similar footage and played music from *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Al-Sisi's campaign capitalized on this climate of fear. Portraying Al-Sisi as a savior, a strongman, and a patriot played perfectly into fears held by many Egyptians. Since his election, President Al-Sisi has continued to draw from and highlight his experience as a military man. Significantly, he has used the military to launch several important national projects. For instance, the Egyptian army was the chief contractor for Al-Sisi's recently completed Suez Canal project (Golla, 2014). Consistent with the vitality theme described in this article, Al-Sisi has presented his projects as evidence of the nation's continued vibrancy.

### Conclusion

This study provides insight into the semiotic and discursive strategies employed by an important Arab leader and sheds light on how it was possible for an obscure member of the Egyptian military to transform himself, almost overnight, into a cult-like leader. Al-Sisi's campaign did not create from a vacuum the signs and discourses identified here. Rather, the campaign borrowed already existing signs and discourses from the public space. The campaign did, however, employ the signs and discourses in interesting and unique ways, drawing meaningful associations and tapping into dominant cultural sentiment and national ideology. The meanings embedded within the campaign posters and video likely resonated with many of Al-Sisi's supporters, particularly those longing for security and safety at a time when the Arab region was experiencing cataclysmic change and instability. Al-Sisi's political opponents, particularly those who may have suffered some degree of political repression, were likely to interpret the campaign content in a very different manner. For these Egyptians, messages about Al-Sisi's military background and strong leadership may have been taken as an indication of political exclusion and/or military domination.

Future research should examine Al-Sisi's political speeches and interviews and use in-depth interviews and ethnography-inspired fieldwork to explore how Egyptians of various stripes interact with and interpret the nationalist messaging. Also, additional semiotic work is needed on the Arab political environment, which should be meaningfully compared with signs systems in other regions of the world. A comparison of this kind may shed light on how sign systems differ across political, cultural, and social lines.

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