Taming the People: Comparing Protests and Populism in Arab and American Politics

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The rise of populism has been an uncontested global reality in recent years. However, it is unclear exactly how culturally distinct populist movements imitate or mirror each other, especially given the different rhetorical, political, ideological, and cultural contexts within which they operate. This article addresses this issue by comparing recent manifestations of populism across contemporary Arab and American contexts, with a special focus on former United States President Donald Trump's response to the George Floyd protests and Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi's handling of demonstrations in his country. We argue that each leader deployed common rhetorical tactics as a populist strategy to undermine the protestors' attempts to articulate the people's will. At the same time, our analysis shows how the different contexts in which Trump and Sisi operate also impact their ability to successfully translate their populism into political effectiveness. By conducting this analysis, our article shows how similar populist tactics across different cultural contexts may lead to divergent outcomes, revealing the importance of institutional as well as popular bases of support for would-be populist politicians.

Keywords: protest, Egypt, United States, Arab, rhetoric, populism

INTRODUCTION

As the June 2020 protests at the murder of George Floyd unfolded, observers around the world compared President Trump's response to that of autocratic regimes around the world. *CNN* correspondent Ghitis (2020) stated that "the United States looks like one of the last places that can speak credibly in defense of democratic rights elsewhere." Reich (2020) of the *Guardian* wrote that Trump looked like "a deranged dictator" as he ordered "officers in riot gear" to clear protestors with flash grenades and tear gas. A former CIA officer even compared Trump's order to clear demonstrators to the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square (Oseran, 2020). According to these commentators, Trump's behavior befitted an authoritarian state, not the world's oldest democracy.

Trump's words blended populist and autocratic appeals, doing much to fuel these accusations; his rhetoric conformed to a certain pattern of authoritarian discourse: denouncing protests, praising security forces, and blaming political rivals. Despite assurance he was "an ally of all peaceful protestors," Trump (2020d) denounced many of them as "professional anarchists, violent mobs, arsonists, looters, criminals, rioters, antifa, and others." In a press interview he repeatedly emphasized the valor, power, and ability of the armed forces, intimating that they might be called upon to disrupt demonstrations: "We can have our military there very quickly. They've got to be tough. They've got to be strong. They've got to be respected, because… there's a lot of radical-left, bad people. And they've got to be taught that you can't do this." (Trump, 2020b). And, of

course, he took to Twitter to portray himself as the people's protector: "Get tough Democrat Mayors and Governors. These people are ANARCHISTS. Call in our National Guard NOW. The World is watching and laughing at you and Sleepy Joe. Is this what America wants? NO!!!" and, more directly, he invoked "LAW & ORDER!" (Trump, 2020f). If Trump's critics accused him of aspiring to dictatorship, his presidential performances in the wake of Floyd's murder did not do much to rebut this impression.

Going a step further, a handful of commentators drew a striking parallel between Trump's rhetoric and the tactics deployed by certain Arab autocrats to quash dissent. Chief among these tactics was Trump's use of populist rhetoric in an attempt to counteract protests. One Egyptian referenced the events of the Arab Spring, saying "All they need is a Battle of the Camel and to torch the Scientific Institute" to re-enact the 2011 events of Tahrir Square; Khaled Fahmy, an Egyptian historian, observed that, like in Egypt, "So many red lines were crossed" during the Floyd protests (Walsh, 2020). Noting the similarities between Trump and Arab rulers, an Egyptian-American writer stated, "He sounds just like one of our despots." (Eltahawy, 2017). In *Responsible Statecraft* Jonathan Hoffman (2020) wrote, "It appears that Donald Trump is not only beginning to adopt domestically the repressive strategies often supported by the United States abroad, but is also taking cues from the repressive playbooks of various Middle Eastern autocrats." These writers and others noted how Trump seemingly mimicked the autocratic rulers in the Arab world he so vocally supported as president. Namely, these observers highlighted how Trump, a populist figure in American politics, appeared to echo the rhetoric and tactics of Middle Eastern dictators, most notably Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. Sisi provides a particularly apt point of comparison given the size and importance of his country as well as the relative synchronicity of his rise alongside Trump.

This article takes up the line of analysis offered by the above commentators—that Trump's response to the George Floyd protests parroted how Arab authoritarians deal with demonstrators—more fully. To consider this claim, we first define what we mean by populism and briefly situate Trump as well as el-Sisi in their respective populist traditions. We then analyze how each leader deployed populist appeals in response to protests, first discussing how protests function as argument before moving on to an analysis of each leader's populist rhetoric as a form of counterargument. Specifically, we show how each leader deploys three common rhetorical tactics in response to protests: naming enemies to divide the people, threats of force, and displaying a military image to delegitimize opponents. We then discuss the ramifications of this analysis for how we understand the populist rhetoric emanating from Trump and Sisi on the whole before offering a few concluding thoughts. In conducting this analysis, we answer Destradi and Plagemann (2018) call for studies on populism and foreign affairs that illuminate cross-cultural linkages in innovative or unexpected ways. If, as Mols and Jetten (2020) argue, there is no shortage of academic attention devoted to nativist and radical right-wing populism, then it is important that scholars understand how populist appeals across sociocultural

contexts can be deployed by political leaders in attempts to "tame" protest movements mobilized against them.

Ultimately, we argue that the contextual differences between the United States and Egypt render these two presidents' rhetorical and stylistic differences quite disparate in their impact and likely short-and long-term consequences. All the same, there is still value in analyzing how each leader seeks, in the words of Hall (1988), "to construct, not simply awaken, classes, groups and interests into a particular definition of 'the people.'" In other words, the successes and failures of these two leaders provide instructive insight into the political limitations of their populist projects and the constitutive potential of each man's articulation of "the people." Trump and Sisi both execute similar rhetorical appeals grounded in tactics of intimidation and division; yet whereas Sisi appears primed to rule Egypt for decades, Trump's presidency was marred by innumerable leaks, a revolving door of cabinet members, and a failed bid for reelection. The very populist rhetoric that helped Trump win the White House also contributed to his turbulent (and largely ineffectual) time in office, revealing the shortcomings of his national populist blend of authoritarianism and appeals to the people. Specifically, we highlight how Trump's inability to shrink the margins of public debate in a manner akin to Sisi prevented him from being able to convincingly cast himself as "the" people's champion, since he faced a torrential barrage of criticism from the very people he demonized as "elites." The ability to silence detractors online and offline is perhaps the single most important contextual difference explaining why Sisi and Trump met such contrasting political fates (as of this writing).

This paper unfolds in several steps. First, we define populism as a political style, briefly contextualizing the populist rhetorical traditions in which Trump and Sisi operate. We then analyze how each leader deployed populist rhetorical tactics in response to protests, first discussing how protests function as argument before moving on to an analysis of each leader's rhetoric as a form of counterargument. We then discuss the ramifications of this analysis for how we understand the potentials and limitations of the populist discourse from Trump and Sisi.

Populism as Political Style

Populism is a difficult term to define. Scholars since the days of Joseph McCarthy have debated whether the term should refer to historical movements such as the Russian *narodnichestvo*, a sociological description of voters drawn to xenophobic and nativist appeals, or a widespread ideological disposition that exists wherever there is "popular resentment against the order imposed by society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class, which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property, breeding and culture." (Allcock, 1971). These divergent approaches to classifying populism—as a set of ideological beliefs, a racist subset of the population, or a description of specific historical movements—are further complicated by debates over whether populism is a political phenomenon that should be welcomed in a democratic society.

Many scholars view the prospect of "popular democracy" as a dangerous wish that can "foment reactionary backlash against elites and marginalized groups." (Grattan, 2016). Rather than

revitalize democratic practice, scholars such as Brown (2010), Bourdieu (1998), and Hofstadter (1955) argue that populism comprises a "paranoid style" which fuels toxic social forces like nationalism, racism, demagoguery, and imperialism; these forces, in turn, enable authoritarian politics on the basis of upholding these hierarchies. By contrast, Laura Grattan contends that scholars should not be so quick to dismiss the ameliorative potential of populism. As she writes, "Radical democratic actors, from grassroots revolutionaries to insurgent farmers and laborers to agitators for the New Deal, Civil Rights, and the New Left, have historically drawn on the language and practices of populism. In doing so, they have cultivated people's rebellious aspirations not just to resist power, but to share power, and to do so in "pluralistic, egalitarian ways across social and geographic borders." (Grattan, 2016). Instead of equating populism with reactionary politics, she argues that populism offers avenues for the downtrodden to resist formations of neoliberal economic and political power.

Both of these viewpoints contain much truth, in our opinion. For the purposes of this paper, however, we sidestep these debates by defining populism as a political style (Hariman, 1995). Unlike ideological, sociological, or historical accounts of populism, a definition of populism as political style allows for a more culturally sensitive approach that accounts for the mediated dynamics of contemporary politics. We align with scholars like Lee (2006) as well as Rolfe (2016), who highlights the "chameleonic qualities" of populism, noting that it is "a slippery term with no fixed meaning or ideology." By approaching populism in this way, we avoid essentialist arguments over whether a movement or leader is *truly* populist or not in favor of an analytical focus on how political agents articulate their appeals in a populist idiom.

That is, we are concerned with the referent populism invokes—"the people"—and how leaders depict themselves in relation to them, especially if that portrayal encourages authoritarianism. Concomitant with such a view is the premise that populism is neither a wholly positive nor negative phenomenon but that its normative value varies according to the situation. A shift in this direction authorizes an analytical focus on how political actors represent themselves and their actions to audiences rather than a focus on the particular ideological tenets a leader might espouse, which allows for a more nuanced consideration of populism's relationship with authoritarianism in different cultural contexts.

While it can occur in top-down, grassroots, right-wing, left-wing, and centrist forms, populist rhetoric typically identifies an enemy or crisis against which the people must be defended (Hall, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). For Trump, who operated as a kind of "nationalist populist," (Rowland, 2019, 2021) the foe aligned against "the people" could be found in a flexibly defined "other" comprised of various groups that appeared culturally or politically threatening to his followers. He thus invoked anti-immigrant sentiments, a common theme in right-wing United States populism, but complemented these appeals with constant denunciations of other groups coded as "elite" in his rhetoric such as journalists, activists, tech firms, universities, entertainment companies, and high-level government

bureaucrats (Waisanen, 2012). Trump's revolving door of rhetorical confrontations worked to escalate cultural conflicts, contributing to a sense of political breakdown or crisis endemic to nationalist populism that enabled him to perpetually cast himself as the champion of "real" Americans (Moffitt, 2016). His populism was thus marked by a paradox, as he promoted "authoritarian values" such as total devotion to him and displays of his authority (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) while simultaneously claiming the mantle of the "forgotten man" and portraying himself as the restorer, not the foe, of American democracy.

For Sisi, who participates in much different rhetorical traditions, populism is a tool that complements his authoritarian rule. As the ruler of a Muslim country, Sisi naturally represents himself as a devout believer. Islamic leaders since the days of the *Rashidun*[1] have called for unity among the community of believers (known as the *Umma*), condemned strife and division, and divided the world into the abode of Islam and the abodes of disbelief. Because unity and protecting the *Umma* are such pervasive themes in this tradition (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2009), it is common for many Muslim rulers to invoke these ideas for their own purposes, including Sisi, who publicly broadcasted his piety as a "marketing technique" to maintain "image control" during his rise to power (Stourton, 2013).

Sisi also emulates the rhetorical style of his role model Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab Nationalist icon who ruled Egypt from 1952 to 1970. Nasser deployed revolutionary rhetoric to position himself as the champion of ordinary people, being the first Egyptian ruler in modern times not installed by a foreign power. His policies reinforced his populist image, as his agenda included state-sponsored industrialization, redistribution of property, nonalignment in the Cold War, cracking down on leftists and Islamists, and, most notably, eliminating all vestiges of colonialism from Egyptian life (Yaqub, 2004; Gerges, 2018). Known as the "Leader of the Arab Nation", Nasser's towering charisma and "Voice of the Arabs" radio program inspired revolutionary movements across the Middle East as he called on all Arabs to "stand by us in our common fight against aggression and domination." (Nasser, 1956). Nasser's rhetorical prowess turned him into an example for many contemporary Arab leaders, including Sisi, whose own style echoes Nasser's penchant for identifying himself with the people against their foes and harshly suppressing domestic political rivals. Like other Egyptian leaders after Nasser, Sisi portrays "the people" as wholly on his side and himself as their champion; this populist depiction, in turn, forms the justificatory basis for his authoritarian rule.

Sisi's rhetoric is thus marked by a continual process of enemy construction, denunciation, and repression to boost his authority. Sisi has deployed these tactics along each step of his rise, as he transitioned from the head of the Egyptian armed services to the political leader of the nation. From his removal of the Islamist

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[1]This term refers to the four righteous, highly-esteemed imams who governed the Muslim community after the death of Prophet Mohamed.

government of Mohammad Morsi in 2013, to his 2014 campaign for president, and later on in his 2018 re-election campaign, Sisi specialized in appeals to the people to justify the repression of his perceived political rivals. In that sense, he operates not only in line with the Nasserist tradition, but also emulates the long shadow of autocratic repression cast by Mubarak.

While much more could be said, the foregoing discussion has demonstrated 1) how populism operates as a rhetorical style and 2) the populist rhetoric of both Trump and Sisi features a fixation on rallying supporters against their political enemies even as each leader operates in their own distinct populist tradition(s). Having come to power in 2014 after the Arab Spring, through what has been described by some as a "military coup" and by others as a "popular revolution," Sisi is no stranger to facing down popular protests. The man Trump once called "his favorite dictator" therefore offers a particularly useful point of comparison against which to compare the forty-fifth United States president's response to the George Floyd protests, as Sisi has also faced down mass demonstrations at multiple points in his reign (Zeballos-Roig, 2019). It is to a more focused comparison of these two leaders' populist rhetoric in response to protest that we now turn.

Tactical Similarities in the Populist Rhetoric of Trump and Sisi

Populism is central to the political identity of both Sisi and Trump. As an autocrat appointed by a fixed vote and military influence, Sisi regularly employs populist rhetoric to uphold his rule, tacitly claiming the legitimacy he does not possess from elections through repeated assertions to rule on behalf of the Egyptian masses. Trump narrowly won the 2016 election and used populist themes to generate the appearance of popular support such as claiming to represent the "forgotten men and women of America." (Trump, 2020a). Both leaders conflate themselves with "the people" and their desires (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). Given these parallels, it is unsurprising that both men turn to populist rhetoric when faced with mass protests.

Protest as Argument and Populism as Counterargument

Public demonstration has long served as "a simple but effective way for citizens to communicate their opinions and attempt to influence the political process." (Wildermuth, et al., 2014). With the advent of the internet, social media, and camera phones, protest provides a relatively low-cost method through which everyday citizens can seek to articulate "the 'voice' of the people." (Wildermuth, et al., 2014; Irwin, 2007). Beyond direct demands, the act of protest can also work as an attempt to challenge, subvert, or lay claim to the meaning attached to public, or semipublic, places (Haskins, 2015; Endres and Senda-Cook, 2011). In these ways, protest functions as a type of political argument whose claims are based on the protestors' implied warrant to represent the desires of the people.

During the 2020 George Floyd demonstrations, protestors across the nation sought to communicate their anger at the death of another Black man in police custody. From Minneapolis to Miami, tens of thousands of protestors marched in the streets, in some places even alongside members of law enforcement. While these protests sparked lots of debate over their meaning—whether some protests should be described as riots, whether the protests were targeted at law enforcement in general, etc.—few people mistook them for demonstrations of pro-Trump sentiment. Rather, the president clearly interpreted these actions as a threat to his "total authority" and responded by declaring, "I am your President of law and order." (Trump, 2020f). Trump's literal turn to the rhetoric of law and order in the face of popular demonstrations bears clear resemblance to episodes of protest during Sisi's presidency. For example, Sisi responded to the September 2019 protests that erupted in response to perceived government corruption (and were swiftly crushed by law enforcement) by insisting that he enjoyed a wide base of support, proclaiming, "If I ask the Egyptian people to give me an authorization and a delegation, just like they did before in 2013, I trust that they will go out in the streets in the millions to do so." (Mubasher, 2019).

Populist rhetoric, by configuring the leader as the representative and embodiment of the people, relentlessly asserts the identification of "the people" with the populist rhetor. It thereby functions as a counterargument against the claims of protestors, who also claim the mantle of "the people" by demonstrating their unity in pursuit of a cause. Sisi and Trump each deployed three similar populist rhetorical tactics when confronted with protests, which illustrates continuities of these appeals across cultures. We now turn to a discussion of these comparative tactics below.

Tactic #1: Naming Enemies to Divide the People

Central to both men's populism is the construction of an enemy against which to contrast a valorized conception of "the people" metonymically represented by the leader. This negative, conflictual aspect of populism often serves as its animating political force; as Weiler and Pearce (1992) note, "References to the wisdom of the common people and homey anecdotes of a politician's humble past are helpful as far as they go, but without an elite toward which the majority can direct their irritations, their frustrations, and even their hatred, populist discourse cannot achieve more than a fraction of its potential." Trump and Sisi use similar rhetorical tactics to articulate this basic populist division of the body politic, orchestrating rhetorical campaigns of "enemyship" against their opponents to escalate political division and thereby secure the support of "the people" (Fowler, 2018).

The most overt way Trump employs populist rhetoric to generate support is through the use of labels. Over the course of his tumultuous presidency, Trump assigned and promoted negative nicknames for many of his political opponents. He attached labels not only to individual personalities, but also to groups of people. He did so infamously in his 2016 campaign announcement speech in which he declared that large swaths of

illegal Mexican immigrants were "drug dealers, criminals, (and) rapists." (Phillips, 2017). He also indulged in Islamophobia (Khamis, 2018). These examples illustrate how Trump deployed nationalist populist rhetoric to construct a menacing "other" against which he and his supporters could define themselves, the central logic of his appeals. He constantly demonized and vilified any number of characters and entities, including, but certainly not limited to, Hillary, China, ISIS, Democrats, media outlets, and even fellow Republicans, which amplified existing networks of negative affective polarization across partisan lines (Iyengar et al., 2019). While a basic level of political division is to be expected in a two-party democratic republic, the extreme vitriol and partisanship of the Trump era testifies to his rhetoric's populist orientation.

During the June 2020 protests, Trump likewise affixed specific labels to the demonstrators, reinscribing this populist division. For example, at his campaign rally in Tulsa, Trump (2020e) blamed "the radical left" for the "chaos, anarchy and looting" taking place across the country. Indeed, he mentioned the "radical," "emboldened," or "unhinged" left over 16 times in this speech. He flattered his followers as well, calling them "good and virtuous people" in contrast to the rioters who "destroyed people. They've destroyed businesses. They've destroyed African American-owned small businesses." His rhetoric worked to draw sharp distinctions between unruly protests and typical Americans, thereby undermining protestors' claims to represent the will of the people for police reform.

These dynamics of labeling and polarization are also visible in the post-2013 political scene in Egypt. Sisi's supporters, for instance, are frequently referred to as *Sisawy*, literally adopting the appellation of the political leader. Equally, Sisi and his supporters commonly label opponents as *Ikhwany*, or being in cahoots with the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of their ideological orientation. At the start of the September 2019 protests, for example, Sisi accused the demonstrators of belonging to a "terrorist organization" that was "the cause of chaos and instability in the region." (BBC News, 2019). Sisi's liberal invocation of the *Ikhwany* title has been accompanied by severe crackdowns, as he has denounced all members of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists, which legally sanctions their repression, banishment, and even execution (Fisk, 2013). Like Trump, Sisi uses populist rhetoric to divide the population in a manner that portrays himself as being on the side of the people against a smaller number of radical, violent troublemakers; this tactic functions to prevent the formation of mass movements against the regime and/or head of state via division. Indeed, division and polarization proved to be among the most visible landmarks of both leaders' reign.

Testifying to the potency of these appeals, cultural polarization has spilled over into the general society in both countries as well. The Trump era's contribution to the American "culture wars" is well-documented, as mutual demonization between political camps led to the highest "trust gap" on record (Jurkowitz, et al., 2020). In Egypt, polarization on the ground and online polemics reinforced each other in a destructive cycle of acrimony. For example, the slogan "The army and the people are one hand," which was chanted during the 2011 revolution to signify unity

between the army and the protesters in *Tahrir* Square, was replaced by "We are one people, and you are another," which became the title of a famous song by an equally famous Egyptian singer: Ali El Haggar. The song's lyrics clearly reflected the deep state of polarization and division which the country slipped into, as it harshly demonized the Muslim Brotherhood's followers and sympathizers, describing them as backward, narrow-minded, self-serving, and unpatriotic outcasts.[2] This new rhetoric signified the widening distance between not just the pro-Morsi and anti-Morsi camps, but also those who described what happened in 2013 as a legitimate revolution, or *thawra*, and those who described it as an illegitimate coup, or *inqilab* (Khamis, 2020). This was not only shown in the abrasive shouting matches, verbal attacks, and stigmatization exchanged between different parties; it was also reflected in popular culture, including drama, art, music, and even interpersonal relationships, which, in turn, further contributed to an ongoing cycle of mutual intolerance (Khamis, 2020).

These populist tactics of labeling and polarization illustrate the articulatory logics of division outlined by Laclau (2005) in *On Populist Reason*. His account emphasizes the importance of "naming" in the processes of collective identity formation. The process of naming establishes the logic—the mode "of constructing the social"—that operates on the basis of division and is the foundation of populist politics (p. 78). Populist discourse thus consists of enemy construction in order to create salient identities around which to create a political order (Laclau, 2005). This "logic of division" is certainly visible in the rhetoric of Trump and Sisi, who both employ tactics of labeling and polarization to fortify the basic populist partition at the heart of their political appeals. These maneuvers "tame" dissent by highlighting divisions within the population, which works to disrupt protests' claims to represent a unified national will and ensure the support of the leader's base. Martin (2021) assessment of Trump is true of Sisi as well; each leader does not hesitate to "maintain cohesion through dissidence."

Tactic #2: Threats of Force and Media Intimidation

In addition to demarcating lines of societal division, each leader also reacted to protest movements with threats of force directed at the media. As Mercieca (2020; 36) explains, Trump used *ad baculum* (threats of force or intimidation) to "exploit the nation's distrust for the media in an attempt to intimidate reporters into providing him with better coverage." Trump frequently referred to the media as "fake news" or "enemies of the people," particularly when referring to left-leaning or liberal news outlets such as *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *Washington Post*, or the *New York Times*. He constantly portrayed himself as standing between these cabal-like forces and regular Americans. In the midst of his impeachment proceedings, for example, Trump told his supporters, "In reality they're not after me. They're after you.

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[2]Here is the link to this song on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lE58cI5cAxA

I'm just in the way." (Ruiz, 2020). Such verbal assaults not only worked to heighten polarization and accelerate distrust of the media. They also led to more coverage of issues Trump wished placed on the national agenda and the harassment of unfriendly journalists online and in person (Mercieca, 2020).

Of course, this tactic hardly earned Trump the support of mainstream journalists. Not one Trump voter was ever on the editorial board of the nation's top newspapers, and he was relentlessly denounced by many of those in news outlets, academia, nonprofits, entertainment, tech, and professional associations. His attempts to display authority during the Floyd protests, such as his infamous walk through Lafayette Park, triggered only greater press outrage. These efforts that alienated elite institutions prevented Trump from growing his electoral support beyond his base.

Yet this opprobrium seemingly strengthened Trump in the moment by amplifying polarization. An August 2020 poll found that over half of likely Joe Biden voters were more against Trump than they were for Biden (Allasan, 2020). This division carried a strategic purpose for Trump, if his aim was to stymie protestors' calls for change. By heightening division, his populist appeals encouraged voters to interpret the protests through a partisan lens. 74 percent of Americans supported the protests and 64 percent disapproved of Trump's response during the first week of June; tellingly, by the end of the summer over 80 percent of Republicans and nearly half of Americans overall no longer supported Black Lives Matter, sizable drop-offs from the months prior (Voytko, 2020; Thomas and Horowitz, 2020). Given these responses and Trump's surprisingly robust performance relative to polling expectations in the 2020 elections, it would seem that his ability to threaten and bait reporters may have helped him forestall demand for major legislative change at the national level and perhaps even rally support for the November election, even as these very tactics also severely limited the upper limit of his political appeal.

Sisi regularly trades in threats of force directed at Egypt's enemies abroad and political opponents at home. Like Nasser's focus on Britain, Israel, and the United States, Sisi often denounces foreign threats, such as Turkish-backed Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar (Al-Monitor, 2020). In another echo of Nasser, who justified his repression of Egyptian Communists and Islamists on the basis that they collaborated with hostile interests abroad, Sisi likewise intimates that his domestic political opponents are in league with Egypt's foreign foes. After rigging the 2018 presidential election, for example, Sisi thanked the people for their "authorization" to "fight the evil people" who might threaten Egypt from within as well as abroad (Al Jazeera, 2018; Sada Elbalad, 2018a).

Like the Egyptian autocrats before him, Sisi exercises tight control over the media through state ownership, restrictive licensing, and vetting hires for regime loyalty (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013). However, with the internet and satellite revolution, he is not able to exercise the same degree of media control as Nasser, Sadat, or Mubarak. Thus, Sisi has opened fire rhetorically on press outlets that do not promote his regime's policies or adopt its narratives by accusing them of serving the interests of foreign enemies. During the 2018 campaign, for

instance, Sisi threatened any "corrupt people" who might aim to stop him from the mission "delegated [to him] by the Egyptian people to take care of the country and to look after them." As he warned, "I know the corrupt people very well. And I would never allow any of them to come close to the President's seat. They have to watch out! They have to be careful!" (Sada Elbalad, 2018b). This speech, like much of Sisi's rhetoric, asserted a total identification with the people while also issuing dire threats to those who may oppose him (i.e., political rivals, journalists, and human rights advocates). Sisi's supporters, moreover, label Qatari-funded *Al Jazeera* "the Muslim Brotherhood's voice," and the government forcibly closed *Al Jazeera*'s Egypt offices even before the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in 2017. And many journalists in Egypt have been "forcibly disappeared," intimidated, jailed, or otherwise silenced by the regime as well, as watchdogs like Freedom House (2020) note.

Each leader tries to bully the press into promoting his populist construction as a dominant "interpretive frame" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Whereas for Trump this tactic helped him derail the Floyd protests by encouraging voters to view them through a partisan lens, for Sisi the intimidation of journalists can lead to much worse outcomes than online harassment. In both cases, however, demonizing certain sectors of the news media allows the leader to scapegoat reporters and direct supporters' anger against a convenient foe, all while reinforcing the basic division at the heart of their populist appeals.

Tactic #3: Cultivating a Protector Persona and Military Image

Finally, Trump and Sisi also reinforce populist division by cultivating a popular image of themselves as "the defender" or "the protector" of "the people." They each style themselves as the indispensable force shielding the nation from destruction by its enemies. This process unfolds in two steps. First, Trump and Sisi seek to create identification. Both exhibit a "man of action" style of leadership oriented around displays of basic and sometimes crude language, which works to convey that he is "one of the boys" and a representative of the so-called "everyman" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). For this tactic to be effective, both Trump and Sisi seek to command the nation's attention. After all, if "human attention" is the scarcest resource in the internet age (Lanham, 2006), then it should be unsurprising that both men seek eyeballs as a means to generate allegiance.

"Don't listen to anyone except me," Sisi told a large gathering, during one of his organized conferences, because he is the one who "knows Egypt best, and knows the cure for it." (Mehwar TV, 2016). Echoing the style of Nasser, who pioneered the one-man show theatrical style of political leadership in the Arab world, Sisi frequently appears before the nation via media, posters, interviews, speeches, or by (literally) making headlines. Trump also is a master at gaining attention—it is no secret that his past as a television entertainer helped him reach the White House, as one estimate found that he received earned media coverage equivalent to $5 billion during the 2016 campaign (Stewart, 2016). Trump held innumerable rallies across the country and used outlandish statements—such as his claim to possess "absolute power"—to

control news cycles by making himself the central story (NPR, 2020). This drive to own attention reinforces the drive to make politics about them; by commanding attention, Sisi and Trump gain avenues through which they can proclaim that they are "the personification of *the* people." (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Second, both Trump and Sisi seek to identify themselves not just with "the people," but with the security establishment specifically. In doing so, they burnish their credentials as the nation's "defender." This depiction fits naturally within the populist "permanent narrative" of division that both leaders adopt (Greven, 2016). Military and police forces play a major role in how each leader signals that he is necessary to protect the people.

For Sisi, support for the military is a natural extension of his political identity as a former general. Sisi described the role of the military during the 2011 revolution as "the protector of the Egyptian people" and "the executor of the people's will" while defining its role as "protecting the nation with one hand, and building the nation with the other hand." (Khamis, 2020); right after the 2013 coup, he literally said, "it is not the desire of the military to rule Egypt." (Against Injustice and Tyranny, 2018). Yet, Sisi routinely invokes his closeness with the military to intimidate perceived challengers. During a spat with Ethiopia over Nile water, for example, Sisi declared, "No one dares to eat the lion's food" while flanked by army leaders. (EG Army Lover, 2020a). Another time he threatened to use the military as a "weapon" against Egyptians squatting on agricultural land, calling them "Egypt's worst enemy" (EG Army Lover, 2020b).

Sisi deploys this tactic when confronted by demonstrations as well. During the 2018 protests, he darkly warned, "What happened 7 years ago will never happen again," and he added "If the army is deployed on the streets, that would be a big danger!" (TeN TV, 2018). Because of his identification with the military, messages such as these convey that any Egyptian considering protesting will likely face military force—not just police force—to stop them. A month after more protests erupted in 2019, Sisi delivered a speech to an audience of soldiers, praising the military as the nation's "shield" and "protector" that would defend Egypt from "external" and "internal" enemies (TeN TV, 2019). Again, these veiled threats work in concert with his assertion that all "good" Egyptians are on his side; as he put it in another speech, "I swear to God that I will never allow anyone to destroy this country or to harm it in any way... We are one people, one great Egyptian people, and we should always stand united as one people and one nation." (Sada Elbalad, 2014). Protestors, like other "evil people," are outside the bounds of Sisi's national community and, therefore, risk facing the full repressive might of the Egyptian army.

Although he lacks a service record, Trump likewise aimed to associate himself with security and the military. As Bergen (2019) notes, Trump cultivated this image by populating his cabinet with former generals, trying to organize military tank parades, overtly embracing forms of hard national power, and voicing constant admiration for those in uniform. He heavily leaned on this image in the wake of the Floyd protests. For example, his July 4 address was saturated with military references. He opened by thanking the troops: "[to] every member of the Armed Forces here this evening, we just want to say that you have earned the eternal gratitude of our entire nation." Positive references to the military packed Trump's speech. He called them "most daring and courageous people ever to walk on the face of the Earth," "The greatest Air Force, the greatest fighters, the greatest everything," "heroes whose courageous deeds improved the Earth beyond measure," and "the heroes of today who keep us safe, who keep us strong and proud, and who keep us free." The speech employed the military metaphor of the "front line" to describe efforts against COVID-19—"Americans battling on the frontlines to kill the virus"—and the police, praising "outstanding law enforcement officers who have been able to fight on the front lines, protecting our cities—many of them facing down violent assaults from very bad people." Lest the point be lost, the final paragraphs of Trump's address sounded outright hagiographic notes: "Never in history has a nation used so much power to advance so much good," and "These are great, great people. These are great, great heroes, indeed." (Trump, 2020c). His words effused praise of the armed services.

In the same speech, Trump warned of threats to the United States. Like Sisi's description of Islamists, Trump offered a stark contrast between the military and the nation's foes: "American heroes defeated the Nazis, dethroned the fascists, toppled the communists, saved American values, upheld American principles, and chased down the terrorists to the very ends of the Earth. We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters." In short, the militarized language of Trump's address assumed the enemy nature of the "angry mob" that aimed "to tear down our statues, erase our history, indoctrinate our children, and trample on our freedoms." His rhetoric mirrored Sisi's claim that he alone can serve as "the protector" of the people, saving them from anarchy and chaos, framing political conflict as a battle between the radical left versus American heroes, history, and himself.

Of course, Trump's control of the military is far more limited than Sisi's. Indeed, United States soldiers were reprimanded for appearing in Trump's campaign material while in uniform, and former Defense Secretary Mattis attacked Trump for making "a mockery of our Constitution" during the Floyd protests (Goldberg, 2020). By contrast, Egyptian General Sami Anan was jailed for 2 years for merely entering his name in the election against Sisi in 2018, much less campaigning or actually speaking out against the regime. Trump was not able to suffocate political opposition or drown out critical voices using the mechanisms of state in a manner remotely analogous to the Sisi regime in Egypt. Still, Trump's military imagery worked alongside his other populist appeals to depict political conflicts as being between himself, the military, and the people against their un-American foes—even as his toxic appeals alienated actual military leaders in the Pentagon and his own cabinet, who frequently resigned or found ways to deny Trump's requests for military parades and border walls.

An additional component of Trump and Sisi's law and order appeals, ironically, is for the leader to situate himself above the

law he claims to be protecting. For example, Trump defended a number of his aides when they were convicted on corruption-related charges stemming from one scandal or another, habitually using presidential power in questionable ways to legally protect himself (Rogers, et al., 2020). These actions find numerous parallels in Sisi's regime, who has dismissed videos exposing government corruption as mere attempts to "defame" the military (Gatenby, 2019). By first framing politics within a logic of division and then amplifying those divisions through nationalist language, appeals, and homages to the military, each leader's rhetoric works to recast the protest movements opposing them as partial, partisan, and even anti-patriotic.

In sum, Trump and Sisi deploy common populist rhetoric tactics against protests. In line with definitions of populism as a form of articulation or as a political style, each leader advances a picture of national politics premised on conflicts between the people and their enemies. This division serves as the fulcrum around which each leader's appeals revolve. When confronted by unfriendly protest movements, each leader deploys a populist framing to assert that he speaks for the people, which works to disrupt the demonstrators' implicit claim to represent the democratic, unified will of the populace.

CONCLUSION: THE PARADOXES OF POPULISM

Trump is not Sisi. All the same, there exist real cross-cultural continuities in the way each leader responded to protests by strategically deploying populist rhetoric meant to legitimize his authority, while delegitimizing his opponents. These likenesses are intriguing, suggesting that transnational conflicts over "the people," who claims their mantle, and how far populism enables authoritarian politics are far from concluded.

At the same time, serious differences in the way these populist appeals are articulated contribute to the divergent outcomes on display in the political careers of Trump and Sisi. The media, legal, and political environment in which each leader operates differ drastically, as Trump's presidency was marred with widespread opposition among a large number of institutions while Sisi enjoys the (coerced) backing of all major organs of public life in Egypt. Moreover, the surface likenesses between the rhetoric of Trump and Sisi mask how the different populist traditions in which these two leaders operate lead to divergent figurations of "the people"—and, critically, the people's supposed enemies. This comparison exposes a fundamental contradiction at work in Trump's populism, which focuses its attention against political opponents within the nation. This rhetorical move constitutes a weakness since these opponents are then able to speak back, attack Trump, and thereby reveal the falsity of his nationalist populist claims to represent "the people" as a whole.

And now, of course, Trump and Sisi occupy very different political places. Trump lost the 2020 election and is banned from all major social media platforms, while Sisi seems primed to rule Egypt for years to come. Whereas Sisi possesses nearly unmatched political authority, exemplified by his control of the military, takeover of religious institutions, and ability to amend the constitution at will (Al-Anani, 2020), Trump's eroded base of support is much narrower. Undoubtedly, the divergences in the two leaders' political outcomes stem in large part from the different degrees of control they wield over security forces and national institutions. Whereas Sisi has been able to successfully squash political opposition through his ability to imprison, exile, or silence dissenting voices, Trump's inability to circumvent the United States system of checks and balances (including separation of powers, rule of law, multiparty elections, American ideological divides, freedom of the press, and bureaucratic resistance) left him unable to shrink the margins of political debate in the same way. Trump frequently relied on populist rhetoric alone to get things done, which is why he was a mostly ineffective president whose major legacy is helping raise the level of partisan rancor in the body politic.

The comparison of these two figures suggests that a populist leader in the United States who is better at generating loyalty within American institutions, especially in centers of cultural and military power, might prove more capable of bypassing the constraints faced by Trump. Trump's electoral defeat in the 2020 election would seem to reinforce the message that populist leaders must find a way to effectively manage—not alienate—powerful institutions to be successful. That relatively obvious finding points to two interesting paradoxes.

First, both Trump and Sisi regularly identify members of the political community as enemies of the people. This allows the populist leader to speak on behalf of the people against their foe(s). In Egypt, for example, even if the "evil" group in question is comprised of citizens, they are commonly accused of collaborating with foreign foes. Trump likewise accuses formal members of the United States national community such as journalists, Democrats, leftists, or antifa of being fundamentally anti-American. However, while state repression maintains the fiction of a unified national community standing behind Sisi, this divisive tactic merely exacerbated tensions in the United States. It put on display the deep disunity of "the" people, thus undermining Trump's appeals by revealing that Americans are, verifiably, *not* a united people. Hence, despite the surface-level tactical similarities between their populist rhetoric, Sisi and Trump landed in very different places; Trump was unable to shrink the margins of public debate in a manner akin to Sisi's repressive regime in Egypt, which allowed his critics to continually assail him over every communication medium imaginable.

In order for populist appeals to be effective, leaders must convincingly demonstrate that there is an actual mass of people who support their cause, enabling them to argue that they stand on the side of "the people." This imperative applies especially in a liberal democratic society with press freedoms, where constructions of "the people" lacking in any factual basis are readily exposed. By repeatedly elevating domestic political foes to the status of "enemy of the people" in his populist rhetoric, Trump has invited the scorn of members of the media, intelligentsia, and voters who resent how his depiction of "the people" excludes broad swaths of the country. Thus, the very tactics that allowed Trump to navigate the protests, by denying demonstrators the ability to credibly speak for the people, also

hamstrung his ability to generate populist appeals that transcended his base. This conclusion suggests that the politics of visibility should occupy a focal place in future analyses of populism and populist rhetoric, building on work done by Walter Lesch (2020). The question of which members of the population are depicted as "the people" by populist leaders is a charged one, and the ways in which such leaders and their opponents negotiate the tensions of articulating necessarily limited representations of the people while also engaging in democratic politics can provide key insight into the direction, durability, and draw of various populist movements.

Second, the very online platforms that enabled Trump's rise as a populist worked to also expose this fundamental contradiction present in his construction of "the people." Because Trump's populism carries profoundly anti-elite elements, it operates most effectively outside traditional communication channels to spread messages, mobilize followers, and gain political influence. For this reason, social media is often seen as an advantage for populists, as it gives them additional, less-regulated platforms through which to reach mass audiences. Yet in using these channels, populists like Trump undermine the foundation of their claims to speak on the people's behalf. Social media betrays the central conceit of populism by empirically demonstrating that the people (however exclusively defined) are *not* unified, rendering populist rhetoric that indulges in the convenient fiction of a homogenous national community to gain political legitimacy implausible at best. Social media thus serves simultaneously as the lifeblood of populism and the ultimate disclosure of its falsity. Without the ability to actually police social media or develop rhetorically salient external enemies akin to Sisi, this paradox will likely persist in right-wing populist discourse in the United States. The media conditions of the contemporary world make any populist program that relies on a unitary construction of "the people" rather difficult. When one adds the considerable resentment Trump's appeals generated amongst the "elite" audiences he demonized—press outlets, tech firms, academic institutions, government bureaucracies, etc.—then it is little wonder he encountered so much resistance throughout his presidency.

In sum, this study points to the importance of context in analyzing populism. Despite the tactical similarities in their rhetoric, Trump and Sisi occupy much different places in their political careers. This disparity no doubt derives in large degree to the variances in the media and political characteristics of their respective countries. Beyond checks and balances, it is also important to note that Egypt *is* a more ethnically, religiously, and culturally homogenous society than the United States, which no doubt contributes to the effectiveness of Sisi's populist appeals.

In closing, the comparison between these particular brands of American-style and Arab-style populism, as exemplified in the populist appeals and strategies of these two leaders, yields a complex picture combining rhetorical parallels with contextual paradoxes. Our findings suggest that scholars of populism still have much to learn from studying how populist politicians articulate political division and the relation of populist appeals' effectiveness to underlying political, social, and cultural contexts, with all the attendant nuances, ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes contained therein.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary materials. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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