

Protests Hint at New Chapter in Egyptian Politics

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The week marking the first anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq saw a flurry of demonstrations across Egypt. A protest in central Cairo marking the beginning of the war was followed by a series of demonstrations at al-Azhar and other major universities, as well as the lawyers' and journalists' syndicates, upon the Israeli assassination of Hamas founder and spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin just three days later. While none of the protests matched the magnitude of those that rocked the Egyptian capital in March 2003, the constant recurrence of public demonstrations over the past year reveals much about how regional crises continue to exacerbate domestic economic and political tensions.

A NEW KIND OF DISSENT

On the morning of March 20, as they had the previous year, central security forces marched into downtown Cairo's Tahrir Square, making it once again resemble an army barracks. The estimated 5,000 security personnel easily contained the 2,000 demonstrators assembled, but the enormous security presence did not deter protesters from publicly indicting the government in a way that was unimaginable only two years ago. In the shadow of the massive government building in the square, Nasserists, Islamists, leftists and liberals condemned the US occupation of Iraq and bitterly criticized the inaction and impotence of Arab governments. A coffin carried through the crowd bore the epitaph, "Here lies the Arab League," and demonstrators cried out: "What is happening now in Iraq will happen tomorrow in Cairo!"

But the demonstration turned quickly to expressions of outrage at Egypt's economic woes, illustrating deep-seated contempt for the government. Citing price increases that have rendered staples like beans expensive and turned meat into an unattainable luxury for many Egyptians, the crowd aimed its anger directly at Prime Minister Atef Ebeid. "Atef, a kilo of beans now costs six pounds! Atef, a kilo of meat is over thirty pounds! Atef, the people of Egypt [are forced to] eat bricks!" Protest leaders underlined the staggering economic disparity between rich and poor by calling out to the crowd, "They wear the latest fashions!" To which the crowd responded, "And we live ten to a room!"

Demonstrators also verbally attacked the crony capitalists arrayed around the regime, who have reaped millions from controlled markets. "Ahmed Ezz, living in luxury, tell us who is protecting you? Down with the monopoly of the steel mills!" Many have accused Ezz of using his prominent positions in the ruling party and the People's Assembly to consolidate control over the Egyptian steel market. Protest leaders and demonstrators repeated again and again, "Corruption, corruption is filling the country -- skyrocketing corruption! Where is justice? Justice is dead." Toward the



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end of the day, protesters were even so bold as to challenge the regime with the kind of words which, only two years ago, no one would have dared to utter in public. "Say to Mubarak, say to Sorour, when will you get the hell out of here?" demanded the crowd of President Husni Mubarak and Ahmed Fathi Sorour, speaker of the People's Assembly. "Down, down with Mubarak!" The chorus continued, "We want a free government, we want to build a new country, we want to live a happy life!"

FLOATING THE POUND

Gone are the days when Egypt could claim to be an emerging "tiger on the Nile," in reference to the Asian tigers. The structural adjustment program, which in the mid-1990s had successfully lowered inflation, attracted foreign investment and generated annual growth rates above 6 percent, had stalled by the late 1990s. Structural adjustment entailed privatization of numerous state-owned enterprises and laying off many of their workers. Yet the remaining bulk of the public sector, still inefficient and overstuffed, continues to hemorrhage money. Hard currency reserves, once as high as \$15 billion in the mid-1990s, now hover at just over \$1 billion. Afraid of the potential social and political repercussions of further layoffs, the government shelved its plans for further privatization. Foreign investors have taken this move as yet another sign of the state's weak commitment to comprehensive economic reform.

The Egyptian pound, long overvalued with its peg to the US dollar, also made Egyptian exports less competitive in international markets, further contributing to the balance of payments crisis, or the gap between exports and imports. The government had maintained the peg in order to maximize hard currency revenues from tourism, despite its long-term negative effect on the country's growth potential. But the result was simply to delay the political turbulence that would follow the inevitable devaluation. Ironically, when the government finally floated the pound in January 2003, most Egyptians saw devaluation as a sudden manifestation of economic decline, when in fact the pound had been under

increasing pressure for years. Not wishing to face the political repercussions of what was turning out to be a freefall in the value of the pound, the government intervened and fixed the new exchange rate at 6.15 pounds to the dollar, up from 4.2. With dollars virtually unavailable in banks and currency exchanges, foreign investors were once again discouraged and a black market reemerged, currently trading at around 7 pounds to the dollar.

Devaluation of the pound, while necessary for long-term economic growth, resulted in rising consumer prices and hit government and public sector employees on fixed incomes especially hard. According to a recent study by Heba el-Leithi, professor of statistics at Cairo University, the inflation rate on basic food items alone is now increasing at three times its pace during the period 2000-2002. The government recently announced that it will increase subsidies on consumer staples and raise the salaries of government and public sector workers by 10 percent in the



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next fiscal year. However, attempts to cushion the blow of higher prices will not make up for the price increases over the past year, much less those that are likely to come in the near future. Popular concern over the economy can be heard in every corner of the country, not just at demonstrations in Tahrir Square. Reflecting popular confusion over the source of the crisis, the pop sensation Shaaban Abd al-Rahim sings about the dollar, asking it to "slow down a little.... You're making the prices go crazy. Everything under you is dying!"

REGIONAL TINDERBOX

But the economy is not the only thing making Egyptians restless. The second Palestinian intifada, now over three years old and bloodier than ever, combined with Iraq's steady descent into chaos, has awakened Egypt's typically apolitical masses. Satellite television has broken state information monopolies, and the dishes dotting the Cairo skyline beam in the latest scenes of US military patrols in Falluja and Israeli incursions into Gaza and the West Bank. Demonstrations in support of Palestinian and Iraqi independence have become regular occurrences. Although the Egyptian government still hems in demonstrations with an overwhelming security presence, the mere fact that protests are tacitly permitted outside the gates of university campuses marks a qualitative shift in Egyptian political life.

Still, the government prevents the emergence of organized opposition through arbitrary arrest of political activists and selective application of the draconian emergency law and emergency state security courts. The Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI), an ad hoc group that attempted to organize relief missions to the Occupied Territories and organize rallies in support of Palestinian statehood, has faced legal and extralegal intimidation. EPCSPI organizer Ashraf Ibrahim was released in early April 2004, after spending nearly a year in solitary confinement for videotaping the beating of protesters by security forces at an April 19, 2003 demonstration. Spontaneous demonstrations following Sheikh Ahmed Yassin's assassination attracted some 50,000 protesters nationwide and illustrated once again the extent to which Egyptians are moved by events in Palestine, as well as the extent to which events in both Palestine and Iraq put the Egyptian state and activists on a collision course.

Signs of increased political consciousness due to regional tensions can be heard daily blaring from storefronts and passing minibuses. Pop singer Shaaban Abd al-Rahim's latest hits, "Road Map" and "Striking Iraq," blast the US for its policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for launching the 2003 invasion. These tunes unfortunately appeal to the frighteningly popular conspiracy theory in Egypt that the US government itself may have been responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001, in order to justify domination of the Arab world. But Shaaban is also critical of the incompetence of Arab leaders, a noticeable shift from an earlier song with lyrics praising Mubarak and former Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. The collapse of the Arab League summit even before its scheduled opening on March 28 makes Shaaban's line, "I wish for once one of our conferences would be a success," resonate in Egyptian ears. A similar lament of Arab impotence, coupled with stinging criticism of US foreign policy, can be found in a long-running play at the Cairo Opera House, "Messing with the Mind." Without question, the regional political situation has seriously undermined government credibility in the eyes of Egyptians from many walks of life, not simply those in intellectual circles.

TALK OF REFORM

Under increasing pressure from both domestic critics and the international community to initiate political reforms, the government has taken a number of steps that sound impressive on the surface, but are clearly cosmetic on further inspection. The first step was the revocation of law 105/1980, which provided for State Security Courts. The government advertised the abolition of the State Security Courts as a great step forward for human rights in the country when, in reality, redundancies built into the legal system allow the government to exert the same forms of political domination through application of the emergency law (in continuous force since 1981). The Emergency State Security Courts, which the latter law allows, are still open for business. Moreover, the government replaced provisions in law 105/1980 allowing for the detention of any citizen for up to 15 days without trial with a new provision built into the criminal procedures law effectively extending the power of prosecutors to detain anyone for up to six months at a time. In practice, the amendment allowing six-month detentions will do little to expand government control because, for years, the regime has employed a practice known as

"recurrent detention," where some 16,000 prisoners at any given time were held for a period of 15 days, released on the books, and then immediately transferred back into custody for repeated 15-day cycles that sometimes stretch for years.

Another high-profile reform initiative has been the creation of a National Council for Human Rights (NCHR). Justice Minister Farouk Seif al-Nasr calls the council "a striking new example of democratic reform in the Arab world." In advance of Mubarak's April 12 state visit to the US, former UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali, now chairman of the NCHR, marketed the body on the op-ed page of the April 7 Washington Post as "Egypt's path to rights." But while some observers are encouraged that respected activists like Hafez Abu Saada, director of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, and Bahey Eddin Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, have been appointed to the council, it is unlikely that the NCHR will produce significant results. Members are appointed by the government and the council has absolutely no independent powers; rather, it serves in a strictly advisory capacity.

In addition to its institutional deficiencies, the creation of the NCHR should be understood in the broader context of government-NGO relations over the past several years. The government has waged a protracted campaign against non-governmental human rights organizations with a variety of tactics, including cutting off foreign funding, smear campaigns in the state-owned press, and last but not least, two new associations laws (the first of which was struck down by the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2000). Through associations law 84/2002, the Ministry of Social Affairs has the power to reject or dissolve any association it deems to threaten "public order or public morality." The government proved its resolve to apply the full force of the law when it refused to grant legal recognition to the Egyptian Association Against Torture, the New Women's Research Center and the Land Center for Human Rights.

The simultaneous assault on independent human rights NGOs and the creation of the state-dominated National Council for Human Rights fits the classic pattern of corporatist political engineering in modern Egypt, which the regime has employed to great effect in controlling just about every area of political and associational life, including labor unions, religious institutions, professional syndicates and opposition parties. Nasser Amin, director of the Center for the Independence of the Judiciary and the Legal Profession, contends that the NCHR is designed to "give the façade of human rights guarantees and nothing more." Amin argues that "if the government truly wanted to implement reforms, it could repeal the emergency laws, dismantle the emergency state security courts, restore the complete independence of the judiciary, release prisoners detained without trial and put an end to the rampant use of torture in prison."

VOLATILE MIX

A sober assessment of the deteriorating economic situation, the ever more explosive regional context, increasing government reliance on authoritarian modes of rule and, most importantly, the volatile interaction of these three variables with one another, can leave one with a fairly pessimistic view of what might be in store for Egypt. But in the

midst of such difficulties, some activists and political observers are emboldened by the increasing political consciousness of ordinary Egyptians. They rightly cite broad-based political consciousness and social mobilization as necessary (if not sufficient) ingredients that were largely missing from reform efforts in the 1990s. The critical question that remains is whether rising levels of popular discontent can be organized and channeled in such a way as to become a productive force for positive change.