Egypt is being Targeted Again

Since September 20, Egypt’s government has been facing a new challenge in the form of massive anti-government demonstrations demanding the resignation of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi both in the capital, and in such cities as Alexandria, Suez, El Mansour, and Helwan. So far, there’s been two major waves of protests, but additional waves seem to be just around the corner.

The spark that ignited the fire of people’s discontent was not sparked by some bearded religious man from the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization banned both in Russia and Egypt, but a young construction businessman who fled his home country to seek asylum in Spain by the name of Muhammad Ali. This individual accuses Egyptian authorities of depriving him of his claim to some 15 million dollars, with particular details of his claim remaining unclear to this date. However, the runaway entrepreneur decided to post a video on Facebook accusing Egypt’s President Abdul Fattah al-Sissi and senior military leaders of the Egyptian Armed Forces of rampant corruption. In particular, Muhammad Ali claimed that in his line of work, he witnessed constant abuse of public funds that were supposedly spent on the construction of luxury hotels, presidential palaces and the grave of the mother of President al-Sisi, who died back in 2014.

The first wave of protests broke out across Egypt on September 20, with Muhammad Ali coordinating them on various social media platforms. It was followed by yet another wave on September 27 - amplified by the fact that people were gathering for traditional Friday prayer.

Although the protests have so far failed to draw large crowds, the authorities have already arrested some two thousand people.

Some observers have already pointed out that there’s a number of similarities between this recent unrest and the revolutionary events that swept Egypt back in 2011, when the once all-powerful strongman Hosni Mubarak was toppled, although, there are significant differences between these events too.

In sharp contrast with the late years of Mubarak’s reign, Egypt has been showing steady economic growth in recent years, which has been pointed out by the government. Additionally, the steps that President al-Sisi has taken over the past five years were positively received, as Cairo was capable of obtaining the financial assistance of various Persian Gulf monarchies in the amount of 50 billion dollars, together with rhetorical support from US and EU authorities. This allowed the sitting Egyptian president to steer his country away from the turbulent currents that provoked the so-called “Arab Spring”. Cairo’s attempt to find a balance in its relations with the main regional and global players, including the US and Russia, the African Union and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, has also resulted in Egypt becoming more and more prosperous.

On the other hand, if in the aftermath of the Arab Spring of 2011, Egypt’s population received much needed economic relief, these days, as a number of analysts point out, most Egyptians are now experiencing a rapid worsening of their socio-economic situation. This year alone, the country’s external debt increased by 20%. However, with the Persian Gulf countries facing their own economic hardships, they suddenly discover that they’re in no position to lend a helping hand to their traditional ally.

That is why among the main reasons behind new waves of anti-government demonstrations in Egypt, one may find rising prices coupled with high inflation rates. It is precisely because of the bitter poverty and the inability to find a job, people choose to take to the streets, ignoring political stability and country’s overall economic successes.
Indeed, 40% of the nearly 100 million-strong population of this country lives below the poverty line. As authorities fail to address these concerns, rising income inequality and corruption serve as a major aggravator among the general public.

Against this background, calls made by Mohammed Ali to express dissatisfaction with the internal policies of the authorities are picked up at mass gatherings, where one can find agents of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, stirring unrest.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Ministry of the Interior of Egypt decided on September 27 to introduce a state of emergency across Cairo. Earlier, local security agencies arrested several members of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic organization that went underground when al-Sisi took office. Those detained were charged with attempting to undermine Egypt’s economy and stock markets by organizing protests, while siphoning large sums of money out of the country.

On top of the Muslim Brotherhood playing a part in fomenting the unrest, there’s observers pointing out that there’s a high probability of Turkey’s and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in anti-government protests. It’s clear that Riyadh has been frustrated with the formal approach Egypt took in fulfilling its role in the so-called anti-Iranian coalition. Some analysts claim that Riyadh can take advantage of the influence it has among Salafi clerics to force Abdul Fattah al-Sisi into mounting an assault with the second-largest army in the Middle East against the Houthis and other pro-Iranian forces.

Turkey’s possible involvement in the promotion of anti-government protests in Egypt may be guided by the fact that tensions between Ankara and Cairo have persisted for years after the overthrow Ankara’s Islamist protege, Mohammed Morsi back in 2013, with Abdel Fattah al-Sisi playing a pivotal role in the plot against Morsi’s government. Erdogan was at the time one of the few political leaders to describe the events that took place in Egypt six years ago as a “coup d’etat”. Turkey’s President Tayyip Erdogan has recently reiterated his position on Morsi’s toppling on the sidelines of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, where he would allocate the responsibility for the recent sudden death of the ex-president during court hearings.

However, it must be recognized that these days there’s no viable alternative to Egypt’s ruling military brass. After three decades of Mubarak’s stay in power, it’s clear to see that the political landscape of Egypt has been completely obliterated, with the only survivors of this process being pro-Saudi Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt’s military officers, being at the head of a massive organization with a rich history, decided they would not surrender their country to the above mentioned forces.

Marshal Al-Sisi, who came to power in 2013 through a military coup, demonstrates his determination to prevent the events of the “Arab Spring” from coming back to haunt the nation. Last week, local police units used tear gas against several hundred anti-government protesters in a poor district of Cairo. At the same time, both in the center of Cairo and in several other Egyptian cities, there would be rallies in support of the sitting Egyptian president.

In spite of calls spread across social media networks urging Egyptians to take part in the next round of anti-government demonstrations next Friday, the situation indicates that these protests won’t gain enough traction to transform into a truly massive movement that could bring down the current sitting government.

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