

Egypt

Tip of the Iceberg

Opposition to the Egyptian regime, and its ties with US imperialism and Zionism, recently became more than vocal. The February uprising of the Egyptian people, triggered by the revolt of security police conscripts, is rooted in the deteriorating economic and social situation, initiated by Sadat's 'open door' policy. The previous month, the slogans chanted during demonstrations protesting the brutal murder of Suleiman Khater, himself a conscript, had indicated that the masses' indignation encompassed everything the regime stands for.

Much as Mubarak's adviser, Osama al Baz, would wish to dismiss the February revolt as «isolated incidents», all facts point to its being a mass uprising. The government claimed that «99% of the people were opposed to these incidents of violence.» Yet gun battles raged through many areas, indicating more than a measure of organized resistance. Fighting swept through the populated area of Giza in Cairo, Ismailia on the Suez Canal, Sohag on the Nile River, Asyut, the area of the Pyramids Road, the industrial area of Helwan and Madinat al Nasr, east of Cairo. A bloody massacre was enacted on the road to the international airport, where an entire regiment of conscripts (300 men) were mowed down by the army. In another incident, one of the largest prisons in Cairo was stormed by angry militants who released 300 political prisoners.

Independent reports said that university and high school students, as well as religious groups from Al Azhar, flowed into the streets to join their brothers in fighting government troops. Officials quickly denied these reports. Nevertheless, universities, colleges and schools were ordered closed until further notice. A curfew was clamped on Cairo and other areas of the uprising. Only with much wariness was it partially lifted for Friday prayers.

The people vs. the government

Although the official media tried to downplay the uprising's significance, the targets of the people's anger showed that their uprising had a genuine class and national essence. First-class hotels, restaurants and nightclubs, especially those frequented by Zionist tourists,

were hardest hit. Damages tolled in the hundreds of millions of dollars. One western diplomat commented, «It is not...the police vs. the government, but the whole deprived group against the government.» Sadat had offered visions of a rosy future to the millions of poverty stricken, but in reality his 'open door' policy delivered nothing but more poverty. The result was rising discontent among all sectors of the population and escalated militancy among the poor, erupting in more protests, demonstrations and strikes, and then the most recent armed clashes with the government.

\$4 a month

The spark which ignited the uprising was an order to extend the conscripts' service from three to four years. Another factor which played into the events was the power struggle between Minister of Defense Abu Ghazala and Mubarak. Supporters of the former tried to capitalize on popular discontent and harness it in their favor. They did not realize they were tampering with a time bomb.

The young policemen who began the revolt are conscripts assigned to the Central Security Forces for three years. They total about a quarter of a million and are used to supplement the regular police force which is too small to fulfill all its duties. The conscripts are drawn from the poorer strata, usually from rural areas, and are supposed to be grateful for the meagre room and board, and \$4 monthly, which they receive. Not only are their families deprived of badly needed support, but the great majority actually become a financial burden, because they need support from their families to survive in the city.

Economic slump

The social consequences of trying to swing a public-sector-oriented economy to a completely 'free' capitalist one are anything but good — except for a small elite. Although it is said that Egypt is the largest recipient of US aid after 'Israel', 90% of this so-called aid is spent by US companies on oil exploration and services for US investments, not on bolstering a self-sufficient economy for Egypt. Thus, for hard currency, Egypt relies heavily on: (1) remittances from Egyptian nationals working abroad, especially in the Gulf; (2) oil revenues; (3) Suez Canal tolls; and (4) tourism. All of these income sources have suffered in the last few months. Due to the international recession, remittances from the Gulf dropped by \$500 million. Oil revenues dropped drastically due to falling oil prices and the slash in production. Suez Canal tolls dropped about \$30 million. Tourism, Egypt's fourth largest source of income, normally brings in about \$1100 million a year. It suffered its worst season since World War II. Cancellation of reservations averaged 50% and sometimes hit 75%. Added to this is the 40% devaluation of the Egyptian pound.

Close the 'open door'

The only radical solution to these problems is closing the 'open door' which Sadat swung ajar. However, in view of Egypt's \$31 billion debt to imperialist creditors, it is not surprising that Mubarak lends his ear to the advice of the IMF and the US Agency for International Development (AID). The IMF and USAID have long advocated dismantling the public sector and fully integrating Egypt into the capitalist market. This would mean reducing subsidies, expanding the private sector and curbing imports.

The vast majority of Egyptians cannot afford to pay world market prices for food, clothing and shelter. Thus, subsidies are a vital necessity and their reduction would rock the boat dangerously. No less vital is the \$8 million worth of food imported daily. It covers only half the needs of Egypt's 50 million people. In view of a population increase of 1 million every ten months, curbing imports would pose a serious problem, especially in the absence of a national policy for boosting local production.

Treading lightly?

Mubarak is not at all loath to follow the advice of his imperialist masters. Yet he realizes full well that he must tread