

Egypt's state of siege

Author: Paul Sedra

Egypt's foreign reserves have fallen to a startlingly low US\$13.6 billion — the lowest level for reserves since 1997, and less than the sum necessary to finance the country's imports for three months.

The black market rate of exchange for the pound is nearing LE7 to the US dollar. The official inflation rate in the cost of food stands at 8.2 percent per annum. Fuel shortages have become a fact of life in Egypt, with lengthy lines for diesel practically routine. Meanwhile, the supply minister is beginning to discuss the idea of bread rationing, proposing a limit of three loaves a day per person.

Amid these indications of social and economic crisis on a virtually unparalleled scale in the country's modern history, Egypt's formal political scene is being afflicted by an equally unparalleled paralysis. Since President Mohamed Morsy issued his 22 November constitutional declaration, two factions emerged in the formal political realm that are, for all intents and purposes, unwilling to negotiate. As if the divisions were not already clear enough, each faction is now represented by a "front" — the opposition's National Salvation Front and presidential allies the National Conscience Front.

Making a mockery of the formal political realm's paralysis is the intense activity of the informal political realm — the politics of the street. Indeed, ever since the president's November declaration, not only has the pace of the marches and protests become unyielding, not only has the flashpoint of resistance shifted from Tahrir Square to the Ettehadiya and Qobba Presidential Palaces, and not only have previously unseen bands of protesters like the Black Bloc emerged, but the tally of injured, tortured, humiliated and killed has grown from Friday to Friday.

And yet again, much like the desperate economic situation, the country's desperate streets appear to have no power to compel the formal political class to act. That class' paralysis has remained largely unaffected by the starkly contrasting movement on the streets. There is a peculiar absurdity about a government that is reduced to berating rural mothers for their purportedly poor hygiene.

One could attribute such paralysis — and the absurd admonitions that seek to fill the void — to incompetence, inexperience or both. And without doubt, these factors are important to consider. Egypt is in entirely uncharted political territory, after all.

But the degree of paralysis — the refusal to act in the face of such monumental challenges — suggests a greater root than simply incompetence or inexperience. In this context, I cannot help but recall the ideas regarding "disaster capitalism" recently set forth by Naomi Klein, most notably in her book "The Shock Doctrine."

According to Klein, in roughly the last 50 years, societies suffering from various forms of political,

social and indeed environmental turmoil have become vulnerable, depending on political circumstances, to economic reengineering in a neo-liberal mold. Ideologues following in the footsteps of American economist Milton Friedman have taken advantage of disasters, ranging from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, to introduce stark departures in social and economic policy. These departures have promoted deregulation and privatization as difficult but necessary "shocks" to the system, which would purportedly lead the given society away from crisis and back to prosperity.

Given the statistics listed above, there is little doubt that Egypt is well on the way to a "disaster" situation, if it is not actually in one already. The inaction of the president and the government suggests, to my mind, not merely negligence, but a strategy to seize upon "disaster" as an opportunity — in political terms, to ensure the dominance of Islamists and particularly the Brotherhood for years to come, and in economic terms, to rid Egypt of the last vestiges of statism and redefine Egyptian neo-liberalism to the Brotherhood's benefit.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that there is a blueprint to this effect in the Brotherhood supreme guide's office. What I would insist upon, however, is that the failure of the president and his allies to take the smallest steps to avert disaster amounts to a state of siege upon all Egyptians.

While the president may bargain that the National Conscience Front will balance and hold off the National Salvation Front until parliamentary elections are held, one wonders whether he has bargained for the power of the street. After all, he and his Brothers were absent on 25 January 2011. Where will they find themselves as the next revolution begins?

Paul Sedra is an associate professor of history at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada.

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