

The Sound of Clapping

Two weeks ago, some people came out into the Minsk city centre on a peaceful protest. A week ago, over a hundred turned up. Yesterday, there were a thousand protesters in Minsk, and also across cities and towns of Belarus. Up to 450 people were reportedly arrested, including journalists. Observers and participants on both sides hold breath to see what the next week will bring.

“Revolution through social networks” is a provocative name for a new kind of popular mobilisation in Belarus. For a country where every political protest was doomed or failed for the last 17 years, it appears over optimistic to either endeavour or support one. Yet both the eroding legitimacy of the Belarusian government and the clever tactics by the organisers make the “revolution” notable.

The Belarusian government is failing on the grounds of economy and ideology. The economic crisis that caused 64% deflation, the five-fold soar of food prices and the 30% increase in fuel price, the lack of available foreign currency – suddenly make the life of ordinary voters very harsh indeed. The economic hardship could be bearable and sustained if the voters had a clear sense of its origins and, more importantly, the vision of their resolution. After all, the neighbouring Poland and Lithuania went through harsher times in the painful reforms of the early 1990s for the sake of re-joining Europe. The Belarusian government, however, is at a loss to present any sense of direction, apart from putting down local fires and blaming indiscriminately. Furthermore, it has to step back on its only policy success – the ideology of Belarusian sovereignty – to allow Russian ownership of Belarusian key economic assets.

With consent as the basis of legitimacy quickly eroding, the

government has stepped up coercion to protect its power. This pertains not only the crackdown on the post-presidential election protest six month ago, and the imprisonment of the opposition leaders. More disturbingly for hitherto apolitical citizens, the intimidating black uniform of the riot police and its blinded metal trucks have become ubiquitous in most ordinary daily situations, in broad day light in the central streets and squares of the country. During yesterday's protests, people were detained and thrown into riot trucks indiscriminately. One no longer needs to be an opposition activist to suffer from the security forces. Once credibly presented as safeguarding the country from disruptive foreign agents, i.e. the opposition, they are now themselves acquiring the aura of aliens and invaders. Belarusians value their privacy higher than anything, and any invasion of it breeds dismay and sustained resistance in the nation known for its guerrilla warfare history.

At the same time, the undisclosed organisers of the "revolution" finally got some things right. They steer well clear of the political opposition who have discredited themselves as hapless and use none of their slogans, chants, or guilt-trip mobilisation methods. They ask their supporters for a minimal commitment: to walk out to the central square on a Wednesday night and, at most, clap. The quiet and reserved Belarusians are much more comfortable with this style of protest. The movement does not yet put forward a programme, as at this early stage it may be divisive. They are simply mobilising discontent amongst the most active social strata, and doing it with great understanding and skill.

The Belarusian government are deceiving themselves if they think that resolute coercion would keep a lid on the raising social discontent. Police repression is intimidating for sure, but it adds to the sense of development that every protest feeds on, and it also deepens the schism between ordinary people and the government that seems to be after them.

The new protest movement in Belarus is yet nascent, and has not spread across the country and social strata. The government may still block social network sites as they have done, and the majority of the population is sitting on the fence politically. But the situation is rapidly approaching a precarious balance. The power will tilt towards the political force that offers Belarusians a convincing and veritable sense of their desired future and a clear direction of development towards it.

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