The Early Stage of the Revolution

1 THE REVOLUTIONS BEFORE THIS REVOLUTION

The revolution that began in Egypt in January 2011 was by no means the first liberal/nationalistic/pro-democracy movement to disrupt the status quo of the regime in power at the time. Egypt's history includes several political uprisings stemming from the people's demands for freedom and justice, even though these revolts were not connected by any ideology or political pursuit.¹ No one has ever proven the theory of historical continuity in Egypt, but I see a link, no matter how intangible or scientifically difficult to establish. Mine may be a sentimental or romantic vision of Egypt's history. But anyone who shares the notion of Egyptianhood, al-muwatana al-Masriyya, which I discussed in the Introduction (with some poetic license), can identify a historic link that most Egyptians feel. The various revolts, upheavals, and revolutions from 1798 to 2011 are somehow connected, if only because each was an instance of Egyptians rebelling against injustice and for freedom. The 2011 Revolution is one link in that national chain.

¹ According to some accounts of history, Egyptian peasants started revolting against the Turkish Sultan, his appointed Khedives, and the foreign profiteers as early as 1822. These revolts were against oppression and exploitation and were not based on any specific political ideology. But the 1919 Revolution was a liberal, nationalistic movement largely inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 and the embodiment of these ideas in the French democracy movement as it evolved through World War I. The French intellectual influence on the Egyptian intellectual elite was dominant, if nothing else because the Egyptian elite favored a French education as a way of counteracting British colonialism. France contributed heavily to support its educational presence in Egypt and offered many opportunities for Egyptian university graduates to pursue their education in French universities; in fact, Egyptian universities commonly sent their graduates to study in France until the 1970s. Egyptians have attended British universities since the early 1900s, but their numbers are significantly smaller than those of Egyptians who studied in to France. After the 1970s, Egyptian students’ interest shifted toward the United States. But between 1882 and 1952, Egyptian intellectuals and political leaders were most influenced by the liberal, democratic, and nationalistic views of France and, through that, of Western Europe.
In the 1800s, the Khedives who administered Egypt on behalf of the Turkish Ottoman Sultans were not only despotic but ruthless. They used Egyptian peasants, *fallahîn*, just as European feudal regimes in the Middle Ages exploited farmers as serfs. They excessively taxed the peasants and frequently used them as forced labor for their own projects. The *khedives* also used non-Egyptians – Turks, Circassians (mostly Sunni Muslim people of the northwest Caucasus), and others who had settled in the country – to exploit the indigenous population, mostly the peasants in what was a poor, agrarian society. This led to a number of popular uprisings: the first recorded one was in upper Egypt in 1822, then in the delta in 1844, and then throughout Egypt in 1863 and 1879. Egyptians also revolted against Napoleon in 1798 when French forces under his command occupied Egypt until 1801, when what remained of them were forced to leave.

In all these uprisings, peasants rebelled against the crushing economic burdens of their rulers’ injustices. But could a sense of nationalism have also motivated these peasants? The uprising of 1798, clearly was a rebellion against a foreign occupier, even if at the time the Egyptian Beys, who controlled the country, were the oppressive rulers. How does one distinguish between oppressive rulers who are indigenous and those who are foreigners? Perhaps there is no line, and the motivation for rebellious Egyptians is to end the oppression – and in the process recover their national identity and dignity. Maybe it is in the nationalistic motivation that permeated many rebellious Egyptians.

All this is part of the historical baggage of the most significant nationalistic expression: the 1919 Revolution against the British foreign occupier. Ideologically, that revolution stemmed from Egypt’s first liberal nationalistic movement, which began in 1875 when Mahmoud Sami el-Baroudi Pacha and other prominent Egyptians rose up to oppose the Turks, Circassians, and other foreigners who had been settled in Egypt by the Turkish Ottoman Empire and who exploited the country and its people. These upper-class nationalists were

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joined in 1879 by Colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi, who had previously challenged the khedive and rose to become one of the nationalist leaders. At that time, he was serving as Minister of War and had been elevated to the rank of pacha (an honorary title equivalent to the highest rank of nobility the country offered). After the British invasion of 1882 and the defeat of the fledgling Egyptian Army that opposed it, ‘Urabi, the nationalist hero, was falsely charged with treason and turned over by the British to Khedive Tawfiq for trial. 4 Tawfiq, then the ruler of Egypt, had come to power in 1879 by the Turkish Sultan’s appointment. Tawfiq’s reign (1879–1892) followed that of Khedive Ismail (1863–1879), a tyrannical, profligate monarch also appointed by the Turkish Ottoman Sultan, whom the Nationalist movement also opposed. 5 During this time, Egypt’s massive debts, occasioned by the concessions Khedive Tawfiq gave to the Suez Canal Company and by the expenditures of Khedive Ismail on the ceremonies celebrating the canal’s opening, led to British and French oversight of Egypt’s finances. 6 Egyptian nationalistic forces

4 ‘Urabi pleaded guilty to a charge of rebellion and was exiled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) for twenty years. He then returned to Egypt and spent his remaining years trying to regain his forfeited property. The Blackstone government in London orchestrated this arrangement while the Khedive wanted to execute ‘Urabi. Probably the most insightful publication on this period of history is the memoirs of an active participant of the time. See Blunt, Wilfrid Scawen, Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt – Being a Personal Narrative of Events (reprint to order by Emero Publishing) (2nd edn., New York: Knopf 1922); Lord Cromer, Modern Egypt (2 vols., Charleston: Nabu Press 2010)(aqi6).

5 On Egypt’s history during the fateful reign of Khedive Ismail, see el-Ayyoubi, Elias, Tarikh Misr fi ‘Abd al-Khedive Ismail Pacha: 1863–1879 (2 vols., Cairo: Madbouli Publishers 1997).

6 In 1858 Egypt purchased 44 percent of the initial 200 million gold francs offering of Suez Canal Company stock. Two years later, the company was almost bankrupt and Egypt had to come up with a further investment of thirty-two million gold francs. That brought Egypt’s financial contribution to some 120 million gold francs; however, because of financial manipulations, Egypt wound up with less than 30 percent of the shares. Egypt then contributed 120,000 forced laborers to dig the Suez Canal and to dig a freshwater canal from the Nile to Ismailia. An estimated forty thousand laborers died of heat, exhaustion, malnutrition, and sickness. Then the government was induced to buy back land that it had previously given to the Suez Canal Company for a further $4 million gold francs. In 1875, as a result of Khedive Ismail’s extravagant expenditures on the canal’s opening, which included the commissioning of Giuseppe Verdi to write the opera Aida, he had to sell 166,602 shares to England for a cash advance of £4 million, which was about one-fourth of what Egypt had originally paid for these shares. Furthermore, the advance of the £4 million also generated £4 million in interest, while England, between 1875 and 1882, made £38.6 million in income from these same Suez Canal Company shares. The financial saga continued until 1922, well after Egypt had been occupied in 1882, on the excuse that Egypt had to repay millions of pounds to the Rothschild banks of England and France for financial deals that it had been forced into. England controlled Egypt’s Ministry of Finance from 1882 to 1922, and no expenditure could be made without England’s permission. England’s financial administrators lived in Egypt and directed its finances, both income and expenditures. Between these exploitative practices and the goods and services
challenged that arrangement. Britain, in 1882, invaded and occupied Egypt, with French support and with the approval of the Turkish Sultan, as well as with the collusion of the Sultan’s appointed Khedive Tawfiq. Colonel ‘Urabi led Egyptian forces to oppose the British invasion, but they were routed at the Battle of Tel el-Kebir in the Nile Delta close to the Suez Canal.7

The 1875–1882 liberal nationalistic movement was crushed by the British invasion and subsequent repression at the hands of Khedive Tawfiq. His successors were lackluster and inefficient, but less despotic. The successive uprisings from 1822 to 1882, along with a combination of many other factors, including the rise of nationalistic liberal feelings across the Egyptian population, brought about the 1919 Revolution, which led to Egypt’s nominal independence in 1922.8

7 Mohammad Khattab, a lawyer from an aristocratic family, was a supporter of Ora¯bi. He raised funds for his efforts from nationalistic wealthy peers and is believed to have been with Ora¯bi at the time of the Battle of Tel el-Kebir. He was my maternal grandfather.
8 Between 1882 and 1914, the Ottoman Khedive was propped up by the British and the French militaries in what has come to be called the “veiled protectorate.” Then in 1914, as a result of the British declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire, Egypt was deemed an actual British protectorate, a euphemistic term for colonial occupation. After 1922, Britain unilaterally ended the Protectorate but kept British troops in Egypt, mainly in the Suez Canal area and in Cairo. In 1936, an agreement was entered that legitimized Britain’s position. In 1954, Egypt under Nasser ended these privileges, though allowing Britain to maintain one military base in Ismailia, ostensibly for the storage of military equipment only. This arrangement ended with the 1956 Suez War.

The British interest in occupying Egypt was more than financial. It was about Egypt’s strategic location (see Chapter 13), and in part about the Suez Canal, which linked Great Britain with its Asian colonies, especially India. During World War I and World War II, Egypt was an important base for the Allies, particularly for the British. The World War I campaign against the Turkish Ottoman Empire forces in Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and what is now Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq started out of Egypt (see Lawrence, T.E., Seven Pillars of Wisdom (repr. London: Penguin 2000) [1922]). During World War II, not only British troops but American, Australian, Indian, New Zealander, and South African troops were in Egypt, along with contingents from other European occupied countries, such as France and Poland. By July 1942 Field Marshal Erwin Rommel led his famed Afrika Korps all the way to El Alamein, where the North African Campaign of World War II, as it was called, reached a decisive point. El Alamein, which, ironically, means “the two worlds” and in fact was where two worlds collided, is only 70 kilometers from Alexandria. Had Rommel broken through the Allied lines there, then commanded by General (later Field Marshal) Bernard Law Montgomery, there would have been nothing to stop the German–Italian forces from reaching the Suez Canal and crossing into the Sinai and Palestine. The seizure of the Suez Canal would have been a devastating blow to the Allies, and would have severed Britain’s link to India. See Moorehead, Alan, The Desert War: The Classic Trilogy on the North Africa Campaign 1940–1943.
The 1919 Revolution against British occupation was a popular uprising led by prominent lawyers, landowners, and intellectuals who had the support of the middle class and farmers. The former demonstrated and protested in the streets of Cairo, while in Upper Egypt (from the south of Cairo to Aswan to the Sudanese border), farmers attacked British garrisons. This nationalistic movement was also a secular pro-democracy movement involving Muslims and Christians alike.¹⁰

¹¹ The overall leader of the 1919 Revolution was Saad Zaghloul, who took a delegation of prominent Egyptians to the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris to argue for Egypt's independence. But British colonialism prevailed, and Egypt was declared a British protectorate, triggering the 1919 Revolution. Saad Zaghloul was exiled by the British, first to Malta in 1921, then to the Seychelles in 1922, and released in 1923 after the British Protectorate status was removed. Others were imprisoned on Malta Island, then under British Control. Mahmoud Bassiouni, my paternal grandfather who led the Upper Egypt part of the Revolution, was tried by a British military court and sentenced to death. While his conviction was appealed and ultimately reversed by the Privy Council, he was confined to a western desert oasis. After his release, he was elected in 1923 to Egypt's first Senate, where he served until 1946. He was also its president. The only leader of that Revolution who remained free and served as leader of the Wafd Party and prime minister for years to come was Moustafa el-Nahas. The Wafd Party still exists. It should be noted that during the period 1882 to 1919 the liberal/nationalistic/pro-democracy flame was kept alive by a number of French educated jurists turned political activists. Their principal leaders, after whom two main squares (actually circles) in Cairo are named are Mustafa Kamel Pasha and Mohamed Farid Bey. They founded a political movement that had pan-Arab dimensions and the first newspaper, Al-Lewa’, that was clearly against British colonialism. See Hussein, Ahmad, Tarikh Mas’ir [Egypt’s History] (5 vols., Cairo: Ma’asasat Dar El-Sha’b 1977–1980) (chronicling Egypt’s history from 1907 to 1929). See also Marsot, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid, A Short History of Modern Egypt (New York: Cambridge University Press 2004) (1965).

¹² Probably one of the most descriptively moving books on the Egyptian Delegation and on the people’s nationalistic feelings was written by Mahmoud Aboul-Fath, who was the secretary of the Egyptian delegation to the Paris Peace conference after World War I when the League of Nations, predecessor to the United Nations, was established. Since “delegation” in Arabic is al-Wafd, the party that grew out of this initiative became the Wafd Party. Aboul-Fath, who later founded al-Mussawar, a weekly equivalent of Time magazine, was a prominent Wafdist for years. But in 1919, he was the secretary of the delegation, which he describes in his book, Ma’ala al-Wafd al-Masry (With the Egyptian Delegation). He describes how the delegates met at the Cairo rail station heading to Alexandria to board a ship to Marseilles, France, and then went by train to Paris, to argue for Egypt’s independence. At the Cairo railroad station, the delegation was met by throngs of well-wishers from all walks of life. Then, as the train proceeded, at every station on the way to Alexandria, for 220 kilometers, more throngs of people, mostly farmers, stood on the rails to stop the train, and in stations, to cheer and encourage the members of the Wafd (the Delegation). “Bring back independence!” they shouted. They were Muslims and Copts, young and old, rich and poor, united by their nationalistic feeling – as were those in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, though by 2011 the secularists had reeded in political influence while nationalistic/
The Egyptian delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference failed to gain recognition for Egypt’s independence from the countries represented at the conference. But its efforts and the 1919 Revolution resulted in Egypt’s nominal independence, gained in 1922 from the British Protectorate, which had been unilaterally established in 1914, though Britain had *de facto* occupied Egypt since 1882. Egypt’s independence also brought about the 1923 Constitution, under which the monarchy was constitutional and the legislative and judicial branches were independent.

The 1919 nationalist/secular/liberal/pro-democracy movement remained active in Egypt through a number of political parties. But by 1951, these parties and the Parliament had become dysfunctional, as had the then leading al-Wafd Party. This political dysfunction precipitated the military coup of July 23, 1952—a takeover that had been brewing since Egypt’s first war with Israel in 1948.

After the fall of the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1918, and particularly after the deceptive promises of the League of Nations based on President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” plan that the people’s right to self-determination was to be recognized, pan-Arabism became associated with national independence movements in several Arab states. Egyptian Nationalism became part of Arab Nationalism, whose remnants are noticeable in the Arab Spring movement that started in 2010.

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1. On February 28, 1922, Britain unilaterally declared Egyptian independence without any negotiations with Egypt. Four matters were “absolutely reserved to the discretion” of the British government until agreements concerning them could be negotiated: the security of communications of the British Empire in Egypt; the defense of Egypt against all foreign aggressors or interference, direct or indirect; the protection of foreign interests in Egypt and the protection of minorities; and Sudan. Sultan Ahmad Fuad became King Fuad I, and his son, Farouk, was named his heir. On April 19, a new Constitution was approved. Also that month, an electoral law was issued that ushered in a new phase in Egypt’s political development: parliamentary elections that took place in 1923. See Fay, Mary Ann, *Historical Setting, in Egypt: A Country Study*, 46–49 (Helen Chapin Metz ed., 5th edn., Washington D.C.: Library of Congress 1991).

2. See Chapter 11.


Today, however, not much is left of the highly motivated popular efforts of the early 2010s: Syria and Yemen are in the throes of a bloody civil war, and Libya is a failed state. Egypt is in a period of transition after avoiding a theocracy and perhaps civil war, but the country is struggling toward progress under a well-intentioned regime whose hallmarks to date are repression and a lack of vision for Egypt’s future. Tunisia is the only Arab Spring country that has transcended its 2010 revolutionary stage and moved in the direction of a somewhat stable government with democratic elements, though it is still struggling with corruption and abuses of power.

Between 1923 and 1952, Egypt had two kings, Fuad and Farouk, as well as more than fifteen prime ministers and cabinets. The nation suffered through numerous political struggles between the monarchy and its supporters and the liberal/nationalist/pro-democracy movement. The latter also had to fight against British occupation, during times when Egypt was a live theater of military operations in the first and second world wars. This was followed by a disastrous military confrontation with the fledgling state of Israel in 1948.

Between 1948 and 1951, the progressive youth wing of the al-Wafd Party and others organized commando raids against British military installations near the Suez Canal, reigniting a nationalistic spark among the people. A few young Army officers surreptitiously supported the progressive nationalist youth and eventually formed a secret organization within the military called the Free Officers, al-dhubhatt al-Ahrār, who carried out the 1952 Revolution that toppled the monarchy. The Free Officers, led by a young Lieutenant Colonel from Assiut, Upper Egypt, named Gamal Abdel Nasser, seized power.
on July 23 and selected Major-General Muhammad Naguib as their titular leader.

Naguib, a military hero, had fought in the 1948 war against Israel and was wounded twice in combat. In 1951, he opposed King Farouk’s faction in the military and ran for president of the Officer’s Club, which was quite daring at the time. Nasser positioned Naguib as Egypt’s first president, and then, in 1954, ruthlessly arrested him and held him under house arrest, where he remained almost until his death in 1984. General Naguib was a decent, upright, and wise man, all of which stood in the way of Nasser’s revolutionary fervor, unbridled ambition, and ego.20

The Egyptian 1952 Revolution took on the mantle of pan-Arabism and promoted uprisings in other Arab countries. Egypt’s General Intelligence Agency (GIA) and Military Intelligence fomented opposition to monarchies in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and the Gulf states, which were supported by the West in general and by the United States in particular.

The turning point came in July 1956, when President Nasser was faced with the United States’s political and ideological opposition to Egypt’s and the Arab World’s nationalistic pan-Arab movement, which the United States demonstrated by blocking the World Bank’s funding for the building of the vital Aswan High Dam. This proved to be John Foster Dulles’ folly: Nasser responded by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company21, and Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt in response.22 Nothing could have galvanized the Egyptian and Arab Nationalist movements more than this resurgence of Western imperialism working hand-in-hand with Israel.23

20 To date, the story of Naguib’s house arrest has not been fully told, and General Naguib has not been historically rehabilitated. Egypt’s first President of the Republic, established in 1953, was not Nasser but Major-General Muhammad Naguib. Nasser was Egypt’s second president, but one can hardly find any reference to that fact in Egyptian history books or textbooks – revisionist history remains dominant. See Mansour, Anis, ‘Abdel Nasser: Al-Muftari ‘Alii wal Muftari ‘Alaina [Abdel Nasser: The One Who was Abused and the One Who Abused Us] (3rd edn., Cairo: Nahdet Masr 1991).

21 See Bassiouni, supra note 6.


Nasser’s revolutionary regime remained in power from July 23, 1952, until his death on September 28, 1970. Anwar Sadat took over on October 15, 1970, and remained in power until his death on October 6, 1981. Thereafter, Mubarak presided from October 14, 1981, to February 11, 2011. All these leaders were from the military.

Nasser was a charismatic, popular, and fiery revolutionary leader whose impact in Egypt and in the Arab world was inspirational. Notwithstanding his failures and abuses, Nasser’s regime was not as corrupt as those of his successors. It was, however, particularly abusive and repressive, with an unprecedented number of arbitrary arrests, detentions, disappearances, extra-judicial executions, and acts of torture.

From 1954 to 1970, Nasser pursued a socialist economic policy, which was largely a failure. It started with agrarian reform, a necessity designed to redistribute the land: at the time, 10 percent of the people owned 90 percent of all agricultural land, a legacy of the feudal land ownership system that had existed in Egypt for centuries. But this laudable goal of redistributing land resulted in the division of large but economically productive land units into small fragments, and agricultural production started falling.

This is not the only example of a social experiment gone wrong. The years following 1957 saw worse: the first wave of nationalizations of private-sector industries, financial institutions, and other business enterprises. Agrarian reform and nationalization of the private sector came at the same time as large-scale state-owned projects, a socialist approach that created a large, bureaucratic, state-owned and state-operated economy that was not cost-efficient. Above all, it became a place where loyal military officers, with or without any business skills, were rewarded with second-career management opportunities.

All this eventually combined to destroy the private sector and weaken the economy, providing the means for corrupt individuals who were close to those in power to advance opportunistic interests. Sadat reversed that course and liberalized the economy, opening a path for the private sector, which turned into an exploitative form of uncontrolled capitalism. Mubarak enhanced this system, adding to it widespread nepotism based on political loyalty. Under both rulers, public-sector industries and financial institutions were sold at low prices to oligarchs. This was one of the most blatant manifestations of institutionalized corruption, during which the nation’s wealth was transferred to people who profited from that wealth and transferred most of it abroad, much to the detriment of the country. As described in this book, these corrupt individuals simply got away with it.
Perhaps because of such visible accomplishments, the early Nasser period from 1952 to 1957 was mostly uplifting for the Egyptian people, as Nasser tapped into an immense reservoir of nationalist sentiment that has always been part of that intangible spirit of Egyptianhood.

Nasser expanded that sentiment into Arab nationalism, which he spread throughout the region with much popular enthusiasm. One of Nasser’s political accomplishments was the 1954 Evacuation Agreement with Britain, resulting in the removal of British forces, which had been in Egypt since 1882.

When, two years later, in 1956, Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt and occupied portions of the Canal Zone and the Sinai, the Egyptian people rose once again in defense of their country. In a unique manifestation of cooperation in that era between the United States and the USSR, the General Assembly of the United Nations ordered a cease-fire and the withdrawal of all foreign forces.

The 1956 war highlighted in Egypt certain domestic abuses and failures of foreign military and political ventures. Then came the devastating 1967 defeat of the military at the hands of Israel followed by the War of Attrition. From there it was all downhill for the Nasser regime, until he died from natural causes, after erratic years because of uncontrolled diabetes, in 1970. During his last years, many around him took advantage of his poor health and abused their authority and power. Egypt’s situation was worsening significantly, and the people felt it.

Nasser and his senior collaborators initially considered Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, to be unremarkable, but Sadat turned out to be the leader who

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25 In early 1957, Israeli forces withdrew from the Sinai, after the British and the French had departed in December 1956.

26 The US Ambassador to Egypt, Jefferson McCaffery, had a positive role in the negotiations in Cairo with the British, led by their ambassador to Egypt, Sir Ralph Stevenson, who also played a positive role. My father, the late Ambassador Ibrahim Bassiouni, was on the unofficial Egyptian Foreign Ministry team, whose role was not visible to the public. When these unofficial discussions reached agreement, the process became official and all the credit went to Nasser.

27 During that war, I served in the National Guard as an acting Second Lieutenant and was awarded Nout al-Gadara al-Askaria, the Medal of Military Merit. Later, in 1984, I was awarded the Medal of Scientific Merit (First Class).