Imperial Rule and the Politics of Nationalism

Why did colonial subjects mobilize for national independence from the French empire? This question has rarely been posed because the answer appears obvious: in the modern era, nationalism was bound to confront colonialism. This book argues against taking nationalist mobilization for granted. Contrary to conventional accounts, it shows that nationalism was not the only or even the primary form of anti-colonialism. Drawing on archival sources, comparative historical analysis, and case studies, Adria K. Lawrence examines the movements for political equality that emerged in the French empire during the first half of the twentieth century. Within twenty years, they had been replaced by movements for national independence in the majority of French colonies, protectorates, and mandates. Lawrence shows that elites in the colonies shifted from demands for egalitarian reforms to calls for independent statehood only where the French refused to grant political rights to colonial subjects. Where rights were granted, colonial subjects opted for further integration and reform. Nationalist discourses became dominant as a consequence of the failure to reform. Mass protests then erupted in full force when French rule was disrupted by war or decolonization.

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Anti-Colonial Protest in the French Empire

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Preface

When the first carton of French colonial reports that I was to sift through arrived on my desk at the Château de Vincennes, home of the French army's historical archives, I thought the task before me was clear. I wanted to understand how colonial subjects came to form the nationalist movements that would confront the imperial state in the mid-twentieth century. I intended to extract information about nationalist protests in colonial Morocco from administrative and police reports and compile this information in a dataset that I would use to test hypotheses about the triggers of nationalist protest. It was a plan that I expected to be time consuming, particularly given the copious and meticulous documentation by French officials, but it was also, I thought, conceptually straightforward.

And yet, as I began delving into monthly reports on early protest activity in Morocco, I found myself unable to answer the most basic question: what counts as a "nationalist" protest? A June 1936 report described a demonstration in Casablanca; thirty "nationalists" protested against a local *moussem*, or religious festival, on the grounds that such celebrations of local saints are not sanctioned by Islam. What made these protestors nationalist, I wondered? The following month saw a series of protests in the towns of Casablanca, Khourgiba, and Fes when French and Moroccan workers went on strike for better working conditions.

Should this event count as nationalist, or does the participation of French workers make it distinctly non-nationalist? In Meknes, more than 400 demonstrators took to the streets in September 1937 to protest changes to the existing water-sharing arrangement; infuriated that the waters of the Oued Boufekrane were to be redirected for use by French settlers, protestors shouted, "Not one glass of water for the settlers!" Should this be coded as nationalist? In November 1937, protests spread; protestors in multiple towns demanded reform, including the right to free speech and the right to unionize, but no one spoke of independence. Were these protests nevertheless nationalist? In January 1944, protestors took to the streets across the country to demand an end to French rule and independence for the Moroccan nation. Were these the first protests that should be called nationalist or were the earlier ones nationalist, too?

I could hardly begin building a dataset of nationalist protests without knowing which protests belonged and which did not, and yet I did not have a ready answer. From one standpoint, it makes sense to group all of these protests under the umbrella of nationalism. Regardless of what any individual protest was about – wages, water, civil rights, or independence – protests during the colonial period tended to pit Moroccans on one side against the French on the other. Looking at the *identities* of the actors involved, nationality appears paramount, the primary cleavage of the conflict. These protests thus appear to be instances of one nation asserting itself against exploitation by another and may all be called nationalist.

Yet the idea of ignoring differences among these protests in order to fit them into the single category of nationalist action troubled me. Although the sides were defined by nationality (for the most part, although not completely) the protests were not all about nationality or nationhood. That is to say, protestors did not always describe their struggle in nationalist terms or assert national differences. Instead, protestors expressed a wide variety of substantive concerns. At times they explicitly de-emphasized differences between the French and Moroccans, pointing to values and aspirations shared across national boundaries, such as

the desire for decent employment, the right to have a say in one's own governance, or the right to free expression. It seemed inaccurate and unjust to act as if these protests were all instances of the same thing, to disregard how the protestors themselves spoke about their objectives. Focusing on the stated *goals* of the actors, rather than their identities, produced a much more complex picture of protest during the colonial era.

I had not anticipated this conceptual difficulty, largely because I had expected that all protest activity by Moroccans living under French colonial rule could be easily and unproblematically called nationalist. I assumed protests would reflect one abiding concern: an end to rule by a foreign power, by the "other." Morocco was, after all, among the most contentious territories of the French empire, acquired late in the colonial period and fully conquered only in 1934. A sense of national identity predated the conquest; indeed, the French established a protectorate, rather than a colony, in part because Morocco already had an internationally recognized national character. Further, according to most accounts, nationalist resistance occurred from at least the 1930s onward. My prior reading of Moroccan history had not prepared me to encounter so much diversity in the kinds of concerns that protestors expressed when they confronted the colonial administration.

Attention to the diversity of demands made by activists in Morocco and across the wider twentieth-century French empire forced me to question my preconceptions about the nature of anti-colonial movements and ultimately shaped the arguments in this book. I noticed that colonial subjects criticized the colonial power not only by using the discourse of nationalism, but also by appealing to another powerful idea: political equality for all, regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity. Opponents of colonialism spoke of the ideals of *egalité*, *fraternité*, and *liberté* in their efforts to reform colonial rule and rid it of its inequalities. They rejected the inferior status of colonial subject and insisted that France live up to its inclusionary rhetoric. One of the main arguments this book seeks to demonstrate is that nationalist demands began when and where the French refused calls for political

equality. Exclusion led to nationalist movements seeking to end colonial rule.

Had I focused solely on the *identities* of the actors in conflict in the French empire rather than their *goals*, and taken anti-colonial protest to be tantamount to nationalist protest, I might have failed to pay attention to how colonial subjects reacted to French decisions to offer or withhold political equality. I would have overlooked the shift from discourses about individual equality to claims about national self-determination, and I would have missed the opportunity to consider how and why social movement objectives change over time. I also would have done a profound disservice to those who expressed alternative visions of how empire's inequalities could be addressed and whose voices have already been neglected in nationalist histories.

Reading through French administrative and police reports on Morocco drove home another point about anti-colonial protest: it was very difficult to organize. As events like those of the Arab Spring, Color Revolutions, or collapse of the Soviet Union make manifest, the most hated regimes can prove durable for decades; there is no easy formula for getting people to disregard their safety and take to the streets. Protest requires opportunities that lead people to estimate that taking to the streets can produce change. The French monitored their Moroccan critics closely, drawing up reports on suspected troublemakers, limiting access to the press, and shutting down meetings deemed threatening to French interests. Seventy-one out of the 263 monthly reports I read document the use of repression against Moroccan activists: they were jailed, exiled, or attacked with force for more than a quarter of the period from "pacification" through independence. Under these circumstances, leaders had difficulty organizing opposition. Political exclusion was not enough to prompt nationalist protest. The second argument this book makes concerns the importance of disruptions in the political order for triggering nationalist protest. In the French empire, mass protests erupted when French rule was disrupted by outside forces. When French authority was compromised in a territory, protestors poured into the streets to demand independence for the nation.

These arguments reflect two broader conclusions I reached over the course of this project. The first is that nationalist mobilization is far more contingent than might be expected. The resonance of nationalism in the context of imperial rule is often taken for granted, but as this book seeks to show, the eruption of nationalist movements was neither easy nor inevitable, not even for those living under foreign rule in the mid-twentieth century.

The second is that it matters how rulers treat those they intend to govern. Nationalist conflict is not solely a consequence of the presence of a foreign ruler; the ruler's behavior is also important. Foreign rulers in a variety of contexts have retrospectively explained outbursts of nationalist resistance by claiming that people were bound to oppose foreigners, regardless of the way they behaved. These claims are often, at least in part, self-serving fictions: by claiming that inter-group antagonism is natural, foreign rulers avoid taking responsibility for their own failed policies and actions. More generally, the assumption that nations have a tendency to be in conflict with one another leads to a failure to investigate the factors that fuel antagonism. In the French empire, it mattered whether the French treated people as inferior subjects or political equals. Nationalist conflict was not a given because of the existence of different nationalities but was the result of an interactive, iterative process between the colonizer and the colonized. That process was a political one, in which demands were issued, responses given, and platforms recast.

The desire for equality, I learned, lay beneath much of the political activity of the colonial era. Persistent inequality heightened the boundaries between the French and their colonies and paved the way for nationalist demands. Activists looked to independence to bring the equality that imperial rule had failed to provide. In the postcolonial world, where authoritarian rule and elite privilege persist, many are still waiting.

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