

The US war drive and the destabilisation of Egypt

Part 1

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8 November 2001

This is the first part of an article examining the modern history of Egypt. The second and concluding part was published on November 9.

The US military action against Afghanistan has deepened the political isolation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, one of Washington's most important strategic and political allies among the Arab states. Too overt an accommodation to American diktats by the ruling military clique in Cairo threatens to unleash a political explosion, in a country where social tensions have already reached breaking point.

While Mubarak condemned the September 11 bombings, and expressed support for the US drive against terrorism, he did not dare openly back the US war in Afghanistan. Public opinion in Egypt, already incensed by US support for Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians and 10 years of US-British bombing raids over Iraq, is universally hostile to military action against Afghanistan. Many Egyptians are sceptical about Osama bin Laden's involvement in the terrorist atrocities in the US, and there have been several popular demonstrations against the US with slogans including "Bush is the enemy of God" and "Egypt and Sudan are next".

Mubarak was forced to tell US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, visiting Cairo early October to drum up support for the US war drive, that "the Egyptian army is for the defence of Egyptian land". But he has backed down from his earlier call for the US to provide proof of bin Laden's involvement in the terror attacks before retaliating and for any military action to be channelled through the United Nations. According to a report in *Africa Confidential*, Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher, when answering questions at a scheduled lecture at the American University of Cairo, refused to say whether he thought the US had proved its case. "We are not the investigators and we believe in the judicial system of the US", he declared.

The US air strikes are so massively unpopular that Mubarak only made his first public statement several days after they had begun. "We support all measures taken by the United States to resist terrorism because we suffered from terrorism before", he declared.

During the last 20 years, Egypt has witnessed a rise in support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Although now ostensibly opposed to violent action, this religious fundamentalist group was closely aligned with the fascists in the 1930s and is responsible for numerous political assassinations, including the killing of the Egyptian Prime Minister in 1948. It regularly carried out anti-working class thuggery in the 1940s. In the recent period, it has spawned the development of at least two terrorist groups, *El Gama'a el Islamiya* and *Jihad*, who have claimed responsibility for several bombings.

There had, however, been a period of relative calm over the last two years since *El Gama'a* declared a ceasefire and *Jihad* moved its operations to Afghanistan. The government subsequently released several thousand people detained without trial and reduced the number of military

trials.

Mubarak is clearly anticipating major political unrest. He has therefore opened up state television to Islamic militants in order to assert his own Muslim credentials and outflank his political opponents. More importantly, he is also using September 11 to renew his own war against "terrorism" in Egypt and has given orders for another huge clampdown on political opponents, further inflaming tensions.

Four members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has declared its support for Mubarak's statements against international terrorism, were arrested in Alexandria. The government has sent 243 alleged militants who have been held in jail for years to the military courts, where the hearings are brief, sentences are harsh and the right of appeal does not exist. Of these, 170 are said to belong to *El Gama'a*.

Meetings in mosques, other than at prayer times, have been outlawed. The right to demonstrate has been curtailed. According to the *Economist*, this clampdown has been extended to non-political activity. Several dozen young men, arrested after spontaneous riots broke out following a spate of hit-and-run accidents on a main road bisecting their village, have had their cases referred to a State Security Court that is normally used for political trials.

The monopolisation of political dissent today by Islamist groups is the bitter legacy of the betrayals of the Stalinist Communist Party and the subordination of the Egyptian working class, the largest and most powerful in the Middle East, to the national bourgeoisie. To understand the conditions and processes that have produced such a reactionary political climate, it is necessary to examine the recent history of Egypt.

By the end of World War II, Egypt was in political ferment. Almost all social layers were seeking to throw off the yoke of British imperialism. While Britain had installed a monarchy in the aftermath of World War I and reluctantly ceded formal independence, it continued to rule Egypt via its puppet, King Farouk. British troops were also stationed there under the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. Together with France, Britain owned and controlled the Suez Canal, Egypt's major source of income and employment.

While the war itself had boosted the economy, due to Egypt's strategic geographic position for British imperialism, the end of the war saw a huge downturn in economic activity. The Egyptian national bourgeoisie, squeezed out by British and French imperialism, was resentful. The increasingly powerful industrial working class sought the amelioration of its social and economic conditions. Land reform was an urgent question for the peasantry. Sections of the army felt bitter at the defeat of the numerically superior Arab forces by the new state of Israel in 1948.

The *Wafd*, the political party formed by Zaghulul Pasha, had led the national movement since the 1919 uprising against the British, but by 1944 it had lost its hold on the working class. In government the *Wafd* had

proved incapable of mounting any programme of social reform. Following the war, this resulted in a prolonged period of political unrest and instability that could have led to the working class taking power. Political life became sharply polarised between the left, dominated ideologically if not numerically by the Stalinists, and the right, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The working class had emerged from the Second World War numerically stronger and increasingly militant. There were many major strikes and demonstrations in the textiles industry and transportation, which gained wider support. But the working class lacked an independent political perspective.

To understand why requires a brief historical review. In 1924, a working class uprising in Alexandria—the cosmopolitan industrial heart of Egypt—was defeated and the movement all but exterminated by the *Wafd*. Following this terrible set back, the twists and turns of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union did much to discredit communism in the eyes of the broad masses.

Following the collapse of the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1941, Nazi Germany launched its war against the Soviet Union. Stalin then joined with Britain and the Allied Powers, ordering Communist Party members to drop their support for anti-colonial movements.

In the 1940s, the Stalinist-dominated Egyptian communist movement revived, but was always fragmented and subject to repression. Most of the Stalinist leaders of the 1946 strike movement were thrown into jail and later thousands were incarcerated in concentration camps.

The Soviet Union's support for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the Zionist state of Israel was met with anger throughout the Arab world.

In 1947, the main factions in the Stalinist movement merged to form the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL) and became the largest Egyptian organisation claiming to be communist. According to its programme adopted in 1950-51, the DMNL was the “fighting organisation of the working class,” but stressed it also defended the interests of “all classes and all patriotic groups of the nation”. Despite their relatively small size, the Egyptian Stalinists, under Moscow's tutelage, had a crucial ideological impact: playing a treacherous role in subordinating the working class to the national bourgeoisie and the national movement.

The Egyptian Communist Party advocated Stalin's “two stage” theory—which insisted that in colonial and semi-colonial countries such as Egypt, the struggle for socialism had first to pass through the stage of so-called “democratic capitalism”. According to the Stalinists, the revolutionary strivings of the masses for socialist measures had to be suppressed and subordinated to a “popular” and “national” front with the *Wafd* and the Muslim Brotherhood. This would enable the national bourgeoisie to overthrow the feudal regime—which was backed by British imperialism—and take power. In other words, the class struggle had to be stifled to prop up the national bourgeoisie and establish a capitalist democracy: the struggle for socialism could only begin some time in the future, after the bourgeois democratic revolution had triumphed.

The DMNL never advanced a proletarian revolutionary strategy, but sought to influence all layers of society, including the military. In line with this, they supported the military coup against the King in 1952.

At the same time, the collapse of the *Wafd* also led to revival of the Muslim Brotherhood, formed in 1928 in the wake of the disillusionment with the liberal national movement and the defeat of the workers' uprising in 1923-4. The Brotherhood sought an Islamic revival and an end to British rule, combined with corporatism and paternalism on the part of the landowners and employers, as a counterweight to the methods of the class struggle. It set up a network of schools, factories and mosques to fill the gap left by the state. Above all, it used religious sectarianism and anti-Semitism in a conscious attempt to combat liberalism, secularism and the

growing influence of the left—many of whom were Jews—within the national movement, and to divide the working class, particularly in the industrial city of Alexandria, which was ethnically very diverse.

Along with the Young Egypt Party, the Egyptian fascist party of the 1930s that was later to rename itself the Socialist Party, the Brotherhood and the National Party were notorious for the violent methods they employed against both the British and the working class. With the onset of the war in Palestine in 1948, martial law was declared and the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed. It responded by murdering the Egyptian Prime Minister.

As the tensions and instability mounted, the King called upon the army to put down the working class. But the army too was seething with discontent over its defeat in Palestine. In 1949, sections inside the army had formed the Free Officers Movement, whose social base was the petty bourgeoisie. Fearful that the mounting political opposition to King Farouk would lead to a revolution that would see the working class emerge as a powerful force, the Free Officers mounted a pre-emptive strike under the banner of Egyptian nationalism, and sent Farouk packing. They installed General Muhammed Naguib as President of their junta, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). “We are not socialist,” declared Jamal Salim, one of the Free Officers, “I think our economy can only prosper under free enterprise”.

Just what this meant was borne out shortly afterwards. When confronted with a strike of textile workers at the most important Egyptian companies at Kafr al-Dawwar, near Alexandria, the bosses asked the RCC to use the army to suppress a demonstration. In the ensuing struggles, during which *agents provocateurs* were seen in operation, a worker and two soldiers were killed, with many more injured. The very next day a military court sentenced two of the alleged strike leaders to death and handed down long terms of hard labour to many others. The strike leaders were hung in the factory grounds as a message that the RCC would not tolerate any independent action by the working class.

During the ensuing political struggles within rival factions of the RCC, the political twists and turns of the constantly splintering Stalinist movement disorientated and betrayed the working class. By the time the DMNL opposed Naguib's military regime, it was too late: it had lost much of its influence in the workers' movement.

The political vacuum that this created ultimately led to the 1954 victory of the even more rightwing Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser in a power struggle against General Naguib, who favoured a return to civilian rule. Nasser proceeded to outlaw all political parties including the DMNL, the Communist and Socialist parties, the *Wafd* and Muslim Brotherhood. He rounded up the Communist Party leaders and threw them in jail, and also severely circumscribed the trade unions.

The Stalinist betrayals of 1952-54 were the culmination of more than six years of treachery, in which the Egyptian communist movement, on the basis of the Stalinist “two stage theory”, had tied the working class and peasantry to bourgeois nationalism and the Free Officers movement during the revolutionary upheavals.

Despite having come to power in 1954 on an explicitly anti-working class platform, under conditions where the national bourgeoisie was very weak both in relation to imperialism and the powerful Egyptian working class, Nasser had to come to a *modus vivandi* with the working class. He carried out a programme of economic and social reform, albeit of a much more limited character than his Stalinist and radical eulogisers made out.

Abroad, he positioned himself as an opponent of the reactionary Arab regimes in Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He promoted a pan-Arab movement as an alternative to international socialism and led the opposition to Israel. In this way, Nasser was to play a dominant role in Arab affairs for more than 15 years.

Nasser's leadership of the new “non-aligned” movement at the Bandung conference in 1955, his opposition to the Cold War anti-Stalinist

Baghdad Pact in 1956, his purchase of Soviet arms and his diplomatic triumph over the British and French during the 1956 Suez War—if not his army’s defeat at the hands of the Israelis—transformed him into an anti-imperialist Arab leader of international stature.

The US responded to Nasser by withdrawing its promise to fund the Aswan High Dam in July 1956, but he took advantage of Cold War *realpolitik* and turned to the Soviet Union for aid, playing off Moscow against Washington. For its part, the Kremlin had no compunctions about supporting Nasser’s regime, which had outlawed its sister party in Egypt and locked up its members.

The Egyptian Stalinists then “reassessed” Nasser and henceforth supported his regime, even from their jail cells. Nasser recast himself as an “Arab socialist” at home and made several attempts to build a mass party, the most important being the 1962 launch of his Arab Socialist Union (ASU). Within three years, under pressure from Nasser, Egypt’s fractured communist parties disbanded and liquidated into the ASU.

Both his domestic and his foreign policies served as a model for many of the other national bourgeois regimes that emerged in the post-war era in the Middle East and North Africa, the most prominent being the Algerian FLN, and Sudan with its 10,000 Communist Party members. The support given to his regime by the Stalinists played a major role in stifling the revolutionary strivings of the working class and promoting illusions in the ability of the national bourgeoisie to satisfy the social, economic and political aspirations of the masses. It sowed confusion for which the working class and oppressed masses far beyond Egypt have paid dearly ever since.

Nasser was forced to take major industries under government control in order to ensure a basic infrastructure for private capital, and introduce progressive social policies to appease the masses. For example, education at all levels expanded at the rate of 8 percent a year between 1952 and 1970. Although free primary schools increased, it was by no means universal and illiteracy remained rife, particularly among girls and in Upper Egypt. Later he nationalised the banking, insurance and financial sector as well as medium sized enterprises, thereby tying workers to the state itself. Further measures included the state control of all external trade and the subordination of the working class through a system of state trade unions and cooperatives. Between 1952 and 1972, the public sector grew from 15 percent of GDP to a massive 48 percent.

Abolition of the monarchy, land reform and secularisation—policies begun under Naguib—and Nasser’s stridently anti-British and anti-French policy, leading to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, were enormously popular and led to a transformation of economic and social life in Egypt.

Nasser reduced the social weight of religion. Essentially secular in outlook, the RCC took some steps to bring the Muslim institutions under state control. The family *waqfs* (charitable endowments) were abolished in 1952 and in 1957, the public *waqfs* were nationalised. The *Sharia* courts were closed in 1956. The *Sufi* (religious mystics) brotherhoods were placed under close supervision and although they were supposedly abolished in 1961, at least 60 were still operating in 1964. In 1961, the power of the clergy was curtailed in the world famous University of al-Azhar in Cairo. But Nasser never completely severed the link between Islam and the state: Islamic principles were incorporated into the 1962 National Charter and Islam remained the state religion under the 1964 constitution.

In 1952, 4,000 families, or less than one percent of the population, owned 70 percent of the arable land. The RCC’s land reforms were strictly limited and aimed at tying the peasants into the state system. Just 15 percent of the lands owned by the royal family and the public *waqfs* were sequestered, along with the land of a small number of the large urban landowning notables who had dominated the political scene. It was distributed in small parcels to peasants, who were required to form cooperatives to access cheap credit, seeds and fertiliser. But more than

half the peasants remained landless and as the population increased their plight became ever more desperate, forcing them to move to the cities in search of work.

There was a rapid proletarianisation of the rural layers. According to census data, Cairo’s population increased from 2.2 million in 1952 to 14 million in 1986, but it is widely believed that the real figures are double these. But while rent control protected those who had homes, it did not encourage the construction of new housing, leading to the growth of shanty towns and Cairo’s infamous City of the Dead, where more than 1 million squat in the old Mamluk tombs on the Muqattam hills.

Along with the increasing Arabisation of Egypt went the loss of its international character. Whereas in 1917, 19 percent of the population of Alexandria—for more than two millennia one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world—was foreign born, by 1960 this had fallen to a mere 3 percent. In the aftermath of the Israeli invasion in 1956 the Jews left and foreign businesses were taken over.

Between 1952-1967, working class living standards rose. Real wages increased by 44 percent and there were other gains in the form of food subsidies, shorter working hours and social insurance, financed by steep progressive taxation. Between 1952 and 1970 when Nasser died, agriculture declined from 40 percent of GDP to 23 percent while industry’s share rose from 15 percent to 23 percent. GDP growth averaged 4 percent a year, although this slowed after 1965. But per capita income rose by less than 2 percent, mainly as the result of rapid population growth, from 20 million in 1952 to 37 million in 1966 and 62 million in 1997.

Even this limited economic development was the product of a very specific set of circumstances: the long post-war boom that was already faltering by the mid 1960s, and substantial overseas grants and loans from the Soviet Union.

After the British and French withdrew from Suez in 1956 Nasser became a hero in the Arab Middle East. He united with Syria to form the United Arab Republic in 1958, describing it as “Arab socialism”, but the union collapsed in 1961 amid bitter recriminations. Nasser’s attempts at unity with Yemen and Libya were no more successful. In 1962 he committed the Egyptian army to a war in support of the Yemen republicans that was to last until 1967, when he admitted defeat and pulled out. Seen as an attempt to extend Egypt’s control over the Arabian Peninsula, his intervention prompted support for the opposing royalists. The war cost a fortune and one third of Egypt’s army. “We never thought it could lead to what it did”, Nasser is reported to have said.

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