The US war drive and the destabilisation of Egypt

Part 2

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This is the concluding part of an article examining the modern history of Egypt. The first part *was published on November 8.*

Nasser's schemes for Arab unity failed in the final analysis because it was impossible for the national bourgeoisie of the different countries, riven by the conflicting interests of rival family clans and cliques, to resolve the problems of the Middle East on the basis of pan-Arab nationalism.

In 1964, Nasser set up the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which he dominated via its leader Ahmad Shukairy, a Palestinian notable. But his ill thought-out brinkmanship with Israel led to the disastrous defeat of the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies in the June 1967 "Six-day War". Egypt's defeat led to the loss of the Sinai oil fields, and Israeli army occupation of the Suez Canal, which was closed down. This, plus the Yemen adventure [see *Part 1*], led to catastrophic financial losses, putting an end to Nasser's economic and social programmes at home. The war created even more Palestinian refugees, as they fled for Jordan from the West Bank, which was occupied by Israel along with the Gaza Strip, and the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem has seen them increasingly excluded from the city.

The 1967 war destroyed Nasser's credibility and led to increasing social and political unrest within Egypt and the whole of the Arab world. When his offer to resign was turned down, Nasser adopted an increasingly authoritarian stance. He began to reverse his economic policies. Riots broke out on the streets in response to the decline in living conditions. In order to meet popular demands to eliminate shortages, Nasser relaxed the controls on private sector economic activity and the state monopoly of foreign trade, leading to a fivefold increase in private sector imports by 1969.

Having seen his "Arab socialist" and pan-Arabist project collapse, Nasser died following a massive heart attack in September 1970, at the age of 52.

The Stalinists had played a central role in Nasser's career and in facilitating Nasserism as a political ideology. The Egyptian communist movement was responsible for the dominance of the Free Officers' coup in 1952 and Nasser's rise to power in 1954. It subordinated the class struggle to the national struggle and brought the bourgeoisie not the working class to power. Moscow then aided and abetted the military dictatorship that kept the national bourgeoisie in power, even while Communist Party members languished in Egyptian jails.

Citing an interview with Muhammad Sid Ahmad, one of the Egyptian Communist Party members jailed by Nasser in the 1950s, one scholarly work describes the role of the Stalinists as follows: "Gamal Abdul Nasser could think of Marxists as useful consultants rather than as threatening rivals because they were in fact never a serious threat to him". (S Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism 1939-1970*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1988)

Nasser was succeeded by Anwar Sadat, one of only two original members of the Free Officers Movement (which had been formed in 1949) still left in high office. During his 11-year rule, Sadat proceeded to roll back all the progressive aspects of Nasser's regime and destroy its material base. That this liquidation of Nasser's legacy was accomplished not by his political opponents, but his own ideological colleague, bears witness to the fragility of the Nasserite project and the political inevitability of its demise.

Originally seen as a temporary stopgap figure, Sadat consolidated power in a right wing coup against his rivals with the support of army leaders opposed to Nasser's Arab Socialist Union (ASU) and what remained of its supposedly "socialist" economic policies. Nevertheless, the Egyptian Stalinists asserted that Sadat would continue the policies of Nasser. Some prominent Stalinists such as Fuad Mursi and Ismail Sabri Abd Allah even joined Sadat's government, only breaking with him in 1975 when he adopted a neo-liberal economic agenda.

Sadat expelled his Soviet advisors and made overtures to the US. Determined to restore Egypt's military credibility, however, in October 1973, and acting with Syria, he launched a surprise attack on Israel that was initially successful but ultimately proved to be an even greater disaster than the 1967 war. The 1973 defeat led Sadat directly into the US camp.

In 1976, Sadat abrogated the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship Treaty he had signed in 1971. He ended the state control of foreign trade, removed subsidies and opened up the economy to international capital through his *infitah* or open door policy. These economic measures benefited a thin layer, who became fabulously wealthy, at the same time creating ever-wider social inequality and precipitating widespread food riots in 1977, after the lifting of food subsidies. The unrest, the worst since 1952, led Sadat to sue for peace with Israel and sign the Camp David Accords in 1979 in a desperate attempt to get aid from US imperialism to expand the economy.

Sadat's accord with Israel turned him into a pariah in the eyes of the Arab masses, and also led to Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League and the abrupt termination of loans or aid from the oil-rich regimes in the region. Any remaining links with Moscow were severed, rendering Egypt entirely dependent on US imperialism and largely incapable of making any concessions to the working class. It marked the end of Egypt's leadership of the Arab world, and any pretence of the political independence from imperialism that had been the hallmark of Nasserism.

Sadat inaugurated a series of political reforms aimed at widening his support. The political system that had allowed only one party, the ASU, and the domination of the military was abandoned and political parties were sanctioned. In 1971, Sadat reversed some aspects of Nasser's

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secularisation of the state. He amended the constitution to acknowledge *Sharia* as a principal source of law and in 1980 made it the main basis of legislation. Perhaps inadvertently, creating the conditions for an Islamist opposition tendency to develop.

The Muslim Brotherhood had been barred from political activity since 1954, and was officially illegal under the constitution, which bans political parties based on religion or race. But it continued to operate, concentrating on social welfare work—generally tolerated by the regime—that assumed ever-greater importance as the masses sank into poverty. Support for Islamist groups began to grow, as the only existing opposition to the regime, particularly among the most impoverished layers and the rural poor. This was not just an Egyptian phenomenon, but was also to be observed in Iran, Syria and Sudan. The Brotherhood spawned small groups that called for an armed uprising against the Sadat government, particularly after the 1979 Iranian revolution. In September 1981, Sadat ordered a crackdown on political opposition. Shortly afterwards he was assassinated by *Islamic Jihad*, which opposed Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.

The resurgence of the anti-working class religious parties was the product of a number of factors: the worsening economic and social conditions after 1967, disillusionment with "Arab socialism" and, above all, the political vacuum created by the treachery of the Egyptian Communist Parties and the Stalinist regime in Moscow.

Hosni Mubarak, who had been a career air force officer until 1975 and was vice president under Sadat, succeeded the assassinated president. Mubarak's 20-year rule has been devoted to continuing Sadat's economic agenda and implementing policies that favoured the Egyptian bourgeoisie and international capital.

The onslaught on the living conditions of the masses could only be implemented by brutally suppressing political dissent and basic democratic rights. Mubarak eliminated government monopolies, reduced subsidies for industry, abolished price controls, cut corporate taxes and expanded the private sector. By the end of the 1980s, this had led to an average annual inflation rate of 18.5 percent, a trade deficit that had risen to $8.2 billion, an external debt of more than $50 billion and government debt of $31 billion, a sum equal to 170 percent of total GDP.

The 1991 Gulf War resulted in the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who had been working in Iraq, Kuwait and the Gulf States. This meant the loss of their remittances, and produced severe overcrowding and unemployment in the major cities, and pushed up inflation. As a condition of obtaining further loans, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded the implementation of an Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme that included the international convertibility of the Egyptian pound, tantamount to a massive devaluation, a reduction in import controls, new financial laws, privatisation and the introduction of a sales tax.

Despite ranking Egypt's privatisation programme fourth in the world, the IMF and other financial institutions have complained at the slow pace of the state sell off, and have demanded the rapid disposal of public utilities, transport, communications and infrastructure industries. They call for greater Egyptian integration in the global economy and expanded structural reforms, including new labour and trade laws that will facilitate sackings.

The social consequences have been horrendous, with a dramatic decline in living standards. To take one of the most telling indicators: whereas 90 percent of the population had access to safe water in 1982, this dropped to only 80 percent in 1995. Official figures, admitted to be an underestimate, place 20 to 30 percent of the population below the poverty line. According to the World Bank, 51 percent lives on less than $2 a day and 7.6 percent on less than $1. This poverty coexists with obscene wealth at the other end of the social scale. The top fifth of the population receives over 40 percent of the national income, while the lowest fifth get only 8.7 percent. In 1994, Egypt was one of the four countries singled out by the United Nations' *Human Development Report* as being "in danger of joining the world's list of failed states because of wide income gaps between sections of their populations."

Official unemployment is at least 11.5 percent, but independent estimates put this considerably higher. One third to one half of all workers are believed to be underemployed. The majority of those unemployed are under 20 years of age. The population explosion in the 1980s means that 23 percent of the population is now under the age of 10 and 40 percent are under the age of 13. Egypt needs to find 815,000 new jobs every year just to keep pace with the number of young people entering the job market.

The education system is in crisis, with nine million children registered in primary schools compared with 6.9 million in 1991. Class sizes average 45 in primary schools, and are at least 100 in the poorest areas. The government spent less on education in the 1990s (4.8 percent of GNP in 1996 compared to 5.7 percent in 1980), while the population has increased by 20 million in the same period. As a result of overcrowding and low pay for teachers, who receive between $26-52 a month, education is poor. Male illiteracy is 35 percent, while female illiteracy is a massive 60 percent. The government has now given approval for 300 schools to be built and operated by the private sector.

As the poverty that followed in the wake of the IMF-imposed policies increased, the absence of a progressive political alternative has enabled militant Islamist groups to get a hearing, espousing a deeply reactionary response to what appears as the overwhelming strength of imperialism and the US government. Since 1992, more than 1,200 people have been killed by terrorist attacks inside Egypt. This culminated in 1997 in the deaths of 58 tourists and four Egyptians at Luxor, in an attempt to cripple the tourist industry upon which the country depends.

Mubarak's first act on coming to power was to declare a state of emergency that has been the hallmark of his 20-year rule. Under the emergency laws, the authorities can arrest people "deemed to be a threat to national security and public order" and hold them without trial for years; civilian defendants can be sent to military or even state security courts, in effect creating a parallel court system under direct government control. Hundreds of civilians have been referred to these courts, where their trials have sometimes been held *en masse* without even the right to appeal.

According to a recent report from Amnesty International, thousands of people are still being held without trial. "Others served sentences imposed after grossly unfair trials before military trials. Torture and ill treatment of detainees continued to be widespread; the majority of cases occurred in police stations. Prison conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment were reported. At least 79 people were sentenced to death and at least 22 people were executed," the Amnesty report states.

While the government asserts that religious persecution is not official policy, this is contradicted by routine discrimination against Christians. Church construction and repairs are banned unless the explicit permission of a senior government official is given. In one of the most notorious incidents in August 1998, the police rounded up 1,200 Coptic Christians in the village of Al-Kosheh in Sohag province and tortured hundreds of them.

None of this attracts any opposition from Mubarak's imperialist backers. The US has provided Egypt with $1.3 billion worth of arms and military training annually for the last 20 years. The US Air Force frequently uses Egyptian airspace to carry out missions.

More than two decades after one-party rule was formally abandoned, apart from the military establishment and big business, the legal political parties are largely formal and devoid of any influence. Even Mubarak's own party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), which controls the overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats, is an empty shell. The majority of Mubarak's cabinet ministers since 1981 were not even NDP

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members, only joining later.

Under such circumstances, the outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic opposition groups are the only political forces with an organised membership and some popular base. However, few analysts have examined the political conditions and processes that have spawned their growth. It is absolutely vital that such an appraisal takes place.

Fifty years after the overthrow of the old feudal regime in Egypt, the rule of the national bourgeoisie survives only courtesy of the military. This is because the bourgeoisie in the underdeveloped nations is organically incapable of conducting any consistent struggle against imperialism and feudalism. To do so would require the mobilisation of the masses in a revolutionary struggle, threatening the position of the national bourgeoisie as exploiters of their "own" working class and peasantry. The failure of "Arab socialism" and pan-Arabism under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak expresses the inability of all movements based on the perspective of nationalism to resolve the fundamental social questions confronting the working class and peasant masses.

Neither the Islamic clerics nor the military have any progressive social programme capable of resolving the class conflicts that have now been brought to boiling point in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. That requires the development of a political movement to unite the working class of the region in a common struggle to build a socialist society and put an end to war and oppression. The creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East would remove the artificial boundaries imposed by imperialism that divide the economies of the region, enabling its valuable resources to be used to satisfy the social, economic and political aspirations of all its peoples.

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