

Failed Transitions from Monarchy in the Middle East: Egypt*

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Introduction

As a "failed transition," the ouster of King Farouk (r. 1936–1952) and subsequent rule by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officers confounded Egyptians' hopes for parliamentary government even as it conformed to broader regional patterns. During the 1950s and 1960s, as dozens of countries like Egypt strove for independence from European colonialism, the predominant form of regime change was from foreign rule to local authoritarianism. The so-called reverse wave of democratization spanning 1957–1972 was driven by the addition of forty-eight completely new states, only eight of which were initially democratic (Huntington 1991; Doorenspleet 2000: 395). Hence Egypt's failed transition to democracy anticipated a broader trend, in which the typical transition would be from one sort of nondemocratic system to another. Like any such transition the process in Egypt can be understood by questioning why the *ancien regime* fell and then explaining how its successor was established. In both episodes the outcomes were greatly determined by local socioeconomic conditions and the state of political institutions, which eroded the monarchy's hold on power and reduced the likelihood that a stable multiparty democracy would replace it.

During the first half of 1952, while control of the country's flimsy parliament changed hands three times in just six months, a covert network of proindependence military officers prepared to accomplish what the civilian opposition had failed to do for thirty years: seize control from the British and the king and put Egypt's government in the hands of Egyptians (Abdel-Malek 1968: 37). (The prior attempt dated to 1882, when Colonel Ahmad Orabi seized effective control of the Egyptian government until his removal by British forces, which by that point had occupied the country (Vatikiotis 1991: 151–154, 379).)

1. What sort of economic, demographic, social, or geopolitical factors interacted to destabilize the monarchy?

Economic stratification and political stagnation in the context of British dominance combined to undercut domestic support for traditionally popular parties like the Wafd and intensify antagonism toward the British and those who cooperated with them. A major variable in this period of instability was the inequitable distribution of land. Large land holdings were the bulwark of traditional aristocrats, as well as the king's family, and proved antithetical to political reform – both

during and after the monarchy. Figures from 1940 showed .5% of all property owners "owned 37 percent of Egypt's arable land" while three million peasants (75% of that sector) owned no land or at most one acre (Gordon 1992: 19). The resulting disparities in wealth and power placed structural constraints on the possibilities for political change, directing Egypt toward new forms of authoritarianism rather than a democracy grounded in a robust middle class and widespread property ownership (Moore 1966; Trimberger 1978; Boix 2003).

The primary peril to the rule of King Farouk and the associated elite of Egypt's leading parties — with the semi-nationalist Wafd at the helm — was Egyptians' increasing intolerance for British power in Egypt and the political leadership's unwillingness and inability to resolve the tension between British sovereignty and the demands for complete Egyptian self-rule. Since 1922 Egypt had been nominally independent from the British, with four "reserved points": British control over the Suez Canal Zone and over Egypt's foreign and defense policy; protection of British interests within Egypt's territory, as well as those of minorities and other foreigners; and British control over the Sudan (Marsot 1985: 82). These terms essentially made Egypt a protectorate of Britain, but over the following three decades Britain played a deeply penetrative role in Egyptian politics, intervening regularly to push elected governments from office when their leadership appeared too confrontational. The pattern began within a year of the January 1924 parliamentary elections, the first to be held under the 1923 Constitution, and continued through Farouk's final years.

2. What set of more immediate factors precipitated crisis in the monarchy?

Between October 1944, when Farouk removed the Wafd, until January 1950, when the Wafd again won elections and took office, Egypt weathered a string of eight minority governments (Gordon 1992: 15, 20). Tension between Egyptians and the British rose during the autumn and winter of 1951/1952 as "violence erupted in the Suez Canal Zone" and continued through January (Gordon 1992: 26). The country had reached an impasse, with no exit in sight.

Against a backdrop of political stalemate and popular resistance to British domination, the proximate cause of Farouk's ouster was the July 23–26 "revolution" or coup d'état. On the night of July 22, 1952, a group of junior military men led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser who called

themselves the Free Officers arrested upper-ranking royalist officers in Cairo, seized control of the national media communications centers, and closed the capital's roads and bridges. The following morning, Free Officers member Anwar Sadat announced the group's takeover and its commitment to the Egyptian people in a radio broadcast (Hamrush 1993: 123). The king, who was away in Alexandria, tried for several days to escape the officers' grasp, taking refuge in his palaces and imploring Britain for assistance. These efforts failed. On 26 July, Farouk abdicated his throne and left the country (Vatikiotis 1991: 378–379, Gordon 1992: 60). Egyptians poured into the streets to celebrate what the officers had accomplished (Hamrush 1993: 123). The traditional opposition parties initially rallied to the Free Officers' cause, chagrined by the soldiers' effectiveness at toppling the monarchy but expecting that professional politicians would be the main beneficiaries (Vatikiotis 1991: 379).

3. Did elite divisions within the monarchy play a major role in the transition?

King Farouk did not inherit or implement the practice of "dynastic monarchism," by which a royal family permeates the upper echelons of government and princes serve as cabinet ministers (Herb 1999: 3). Such a system, argues Michael Herb, provides a check on the ambitions of individual aspirants to the throne, prompting elites to bandwagon rather than balance and thus avoid intra-family disputes escalating and spilling out into the public (1999: 47). By contrast, monarchies where ruling family members are not comfortably ensconced in the wings of government tend to suffer from internal power struggles. As it happened, in Egypt dissension did not spring from the king's relatives and leadership conflicts outside the ruling family played a relatively small role.

Using the terminology of democratization studies, the "ins" were largely committed to preserving the system and their privileges. Incessant competition between the palace and parliament in Egypt did not aim at overthrowing the system. Rather, one could say that the most prominent elite conflict was between Farouk and party leaders on one side and the British on the other. Yet even that formulation overstates the level of elite conflict, for Farouk and Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas (p.m. Jan. 1950–Jan. 1952) functioned more as brokers or intermediaries between the British and the Egyptian public than advocates of the latter's interests. The challenge thus came from the "outs," mainly the Egyptian military, which had only recently assumed a prominent role

in domestic policing and for decades was secondary to British forces as an institution for maintainer of order.

4. Did mass mobilization against the monarchy play a major role?

Mass protests during the final decade of the monarchy were largely directed at the British, rather than at the palace. Violent clashes (see below) were a symptom of Egyptians' deep disapproval of the current system and they ratified the failure of the country's official political forces to resolve the crisis. Indeed, the lack of party-organized mass mobilization signified the complicity of the Wafd in reinforcing the political ailments it purported to address.

5. Did violence play a major role? Why or why not?

Violent incidents, largely between Egyptians and British soldiers, escalated in the years prior to the Free Officers' coup. From 1949 through 1951 the annual number of acts of violence doubled each year (Dekmejian 1971: 34). (Nasser's claims to bringing stability notwithstanding, violence continued rising through 1954.) However, losses of life and property were still on a relatively low level when Farouk was deposed. There was nothing on the order of the kind of militant movements that would challenge Egypt's government in the 1990s, much less the type of sustained insurgency faced by the Nepalese monarchy in its final years. That said, the violence that did occur signaled widespread discontent, with the British first and foremost but also with the king.

Nearly six hundred Egyptian fighters died in acts of anticolonial resistance in December 1951 (Abdel-Malek, 1968: 32). On January 16, 1952, demonstrations began in Cairo, and similar protests sprouted up in other parts of the country. On January 25, British soldiers attempted to quell unrest in the town of Ismailia, assaulting local police and killing over fifty people (Vatikiotis, 1991: 371–372). The next day, rioters in Cairo set fire to much of the city's business district (Gordon, 1992: 27). The army was deployed to restore order in the streets of the capital, and mass arrests soon followed. The prime minister declared the country to be in "a state of siege," and the government incarcerated thousands accused of aiding the guerilla attacks (Abdel-Malek, 1968: 37). These draconian measures appeared effective, and the clashes of January 1952 did not recur in the subsequent months.

Why did violence not play a larger role? There is speculation that by overthrowing Farouk, Nasser preempted revolution or civil war, pulling Egypt back from the brink of a national cataclysm. Certainly the Free Officers portrayed themselves as implementing the will of the Egyptian people and their actions were initially welcomed. As far as the downfall of the monarchy is concerned, however, violence was low intensity and contextual. Perhaps most significant were the fires in downtown Cairo, which provided the army experience in taking control and demonstrating its organizational capacity. The coup itself was executed almost wholly without bloodshed: Two soldiers were killed on July 26 (Gordon 1992: 14).

6. Did the collapse or crisis in the monarchy lead to democracy or a new form of autocracy? Explain the outcome.

Egypt's monarchy was followed by a government that shed the shackles of colonial rule even as it curtailed the domestic movement for more representative government. A new form of authoritarianism took hold. Built around Nasser and his military cohort, it operated through a civilian organization, the Liberation Rally (est. 1953), which would be succeeded by a series of dominant parties over the coming decades. As a new single-party rose the existing parties were relegated to the margins. The new leadership's inclination to exclude competing voices became more ingrained over the months that followed the coup, culminating in the crisis of March 1954 and Nasser's triumph over his estranged colleague General Muhammad Naguib.

The Free Officers had envisioned themselves as provisional stewards who would rout the constitutional monarchy's worst elements and thereby enable a government based on popular sovereignty to take hold. Yet success and popular adulation steadily emboldened the military leaders to become rulers, not just political custodians (Gordon 1992: 58). Nasser gradually came to perceive popularly elected government as an impediment to Egypt's development and reversed his initial plans of handing over power to one. He assembled a portion of the Free Officers, along with a small number of officers uninvolved in the original coup, to create a fourteen-member Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) to administer the country (Beattie 1994: 70, 85). The RCC's members then set out to remedy the country's ills as they perceived them, targeting the landholding aristocracy, political parties, and fellow officers who favored a return to civilian government.

The RCC pushed through land reform on September 9, 1952, after replacing the prime minister, Ali Mahir, who objected to the 200 acre limit being imposed (Gordon, 1992: 67). Thus "large landlords ceased to exist as a political force" (Richards, 1996: 155). The junta then placed party formation under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, limiting the ability of new parties to form. On December 10, 1952, Nasser's colleagues revoked the 1923 constitution and began taking positions in the state bureaucracy (Beattie 1994: 78–79). On January 17, 1953, they ordered that all existing opposition parties be dissolved (the Society of Muslim Brothers was initially exempted) and the RCC inaugurated the beginning of a three-year transition period "to enable the establishment of healthy constitutional democratic government" (Hamrush 1993: 13; Beattie 1994: 48). A week later the RCC created the Liberation Rally, a national organization that could aggregate members of the disbanded opposition parties (Hamrush 1993: 139).

Nasser's bid for hegemony cleared its final obstacle in the spring of 1954, when he drowned out General Naguib's call for his return to the barracks. Naguib had served as the RCC's elder statesmen and helped dignify the RCC's inchoate administration during its initial months (Beattie 1994: 68). When the country was formally declared a republic on 18 June 1953, Naguib became Egypt's first president (Abdel-Malek 1968: 93). Unlike the Free Officers, to which he did not formally belong, Naguib was from a military family and had a more conventional and stricter idea of the military's political role than that espoused by some of his interventionist juniors (Vatikiotis 1991: 384). Naguib advocated and, by virtue of his popularity, would likely have benefited from a transition to fully elected government. He and his supporters lost this battle, though, in what was essentially a streetfight between the Liberation Rally and less organized advocates of a return to parliamentarism.

With a posture of self-abnegation, the RCC resolved on March 25, 1954 that it would dissolve on 24 July and return Egypt to civilian control (Vatikiotis 1991: 385). In addition, the council vowed to recognize political rights and lift the ban on independent political party organizations (Hamrush, 1993: 150). Yet these promises were merely the instruments for dispatching Naguib's supporters and settling the debate over who would rule Egypt. The RCC's posture of political liberalization lured Nasser's adversaries out into open, onto the streets of Cairo, where the Liberation Rally summarily crushed them. The day after the council's announcement, opposition parties, the lawyers' and journalists' syndicates, and university students rallied with the com-

mon goal of overcoming the RCC. (Conspicuously absent from this alliance was the Society of Muslim Brothers, which had reached an accord with Nasser during the prior month; hundreds of imprisoned Muslim Brothers members were freed, and the group's leaders began to eschew the newly emboldened opposition (Gordon 1992: 135, Beattie 1994: 96).) As the opposition took to the streets, Nasser activated the Liberation Rally, portions of the armed service, and the transportation workers' union in a countermobilization effort that discredited the revival of parties as a return to the corrupt practices of the monarchy period (Hamrush 1993: 152). The fabricated crisis provided the pretext for freezing any movement toward democracy and broke the link between Naguib's faction in the military and their backers in society (Vatikiotis 1991: 386). Despite their determination, students, professionals, old party politicians, and other pro-Naguib demonstrators were outnumbered and overpowered. They lacked the mass support needed to repel the Liberation Rally's broad assemblage of labor unions and government workers (Dekmejian 1971: 30).

Competing rallies quickly gave way to bloody clashes, and prodemocracy forces were decimated by 28 March (Gordon 1992: 135). The next day, just four days after they had announced a political opening, the RCC leaders "heeded" the public's demand for them to remain in power, reestablishing censorship of the press and the ban on opposition party activities (Beattie, 1994: 97). The council's about-face from liberalization to repression dashed any hopes for a return to parliamentary democracy (Hamrush 1993: 152). Naguib no longer had the influence to challenge his fellow officers. He continued to hold the office of president but had been ejected from the RCC (Abdel-Malek 1968: 95). Nasser assumed the effective executive post of prime minister on 7 April (Hamrush 1993: 152). On November 14, 1954, Naguib was removed from the presidency and placed under house arrest (Abdel-Malek, 1968 552: 96).

By the end of 1954, less than thirty months after the original coup, Nasser and the remaining leaders of the RCC had solidified their control. Through a referendum and uncontested plebiscite in 1956, Egyptians approved a new constitution, which ended the transition period, and chose Nasser as president with an alleged 99.9% vote share. The 1956 constitution granted the president broad authority, allowing his decrees to carry the power of law, and instituted the National Union, an organizational successor to the Liberation Rally that replaced all other alternative parties (Hamrush 1993: 153–155).

Although Nasser's battle with Naguib dealt the textitcoup de grace to any hopes of parlia-

mentary rule, it is worth reflecting on the prospects of a counterfactual shift to parliamentarism. The road not taken — a scenario in which Nasser and his associates returned to the barracks and Naguib ruled as a civilian president — suggests that a transition to democracy was possible, if not in March 1954 then in 1952. However, the significance of these actors in the closing drama of this period was rivaled, if not overshadowed, by the daunting socioeconomic obstacles to a substantial redistribution of power. The glaring inequalities that helped drive the country to civil strife would also have daunted any successor elected government. Although the RCC's land reform decimated the position of the traditional aristocracy they did not ensure economic equality for the mass of Egyptians. Recent scholarship on democratization has noted the problems inequality and capital immobility pose for democratic rule (Boix 2003). These factors were among the most salient features of Egyptian society in the 1950s and they were likely to hinder democratization under a civilian presidency.

7. What role if any did international actors play in either undermining autocracy or facilitating/impeding a democratic transition?

The British worked to fortify their beneficial relationship with King Farouk and had long opposed the most fundamental democratic demand voiced by Egyptians: an end to colonial control. It was this intransigence which spurred the struggle for national liberation the Free Officers proposed to answer (Gordon 1992: 32, 39). Whether or not British support for Farouk had the unintended consequence of weakening the monarchy is difficult to say. More clear is the impact British suzerainty had in curtailing political pluralism by prompting Egyptians to prioritize their struggle for sovereignty over an internal debate about democracy.

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