



Ahmad Urabi: Delegate of the People Social Mobilization in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule

Sean Lyngaas

On June 11, 1882, the port of Alexandria lay smoldering in rubble. At the urging of the Egyptian viceroy, Tawfiq (r. 1879-1892), the British had bombarded the city in an effort to extinguish an insurrectionist government headed by Ahmad Urabi. Beneath the billows of smoke were the charred remains of a once-proud city. Alexandria had embodied much of what brought Egypt to the fore in the nineteenth century: openness to foreigners and commerce against the backdrop of a modernizing infrastructure. Now this noble concept was in flames, and with it went the vision of participatory government that had coalesced in the years prior to Alexandria's immolation.

The Urabi Revolt (1881-1882) saw the Egyptian military capitalize on societal discontent, which had been brewing for decades, to usurp the Ottoman khedive. State repression of political freedoms, crippling taxes, discrimination in the Turco-Circassian bureaucracy, and a khedive, Tawfiq, who ultimately sided with Europeans over Egyptians, were all part of the brew that came to boil in the opening months of 1881.¹

Sean Lyngaas is a first-year MALD student concentrating in Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization and International Information and Communication. He earned a B.A. in International Comparative Studies and Public Policy from Duke University.

Aside from these contributing factors, the revolt would not have enjoyed such widespread support among Egyptians without the emergence of a political consciousness brought on by an intellectual class that found common cause with Urabi. Counter to the dismissive views of British officials, this was no mere mutiny by a group of officers in over their heads. Rather, it was precisely because the Urabi Revolt enjoyed support from a range of societal strata that Britain felt the need to crush the movement to protect its interests.

This paper will examine the three main components of the Urabist coalition, namely the landed elite and their peasant subjects, the intelligentsia and the native Egyptian officers who did the heavy lifting in carrying out the rebellion. From the illiterate Egyptian peasant to the educated Syrian immigrants who published pro-Urabi newspapers, this coalition represented a diverse cross-section of Egyptian society in terms of race and class. Despite having differing interests and visions for the future of Egypt, these three groups joined forces to protest their underrepresentation—and European

Alexandria had embodied much of what brought Egypt to the fore in the nineteenth century: openness to foreigners and commerce against the backdrop of a modernizing infrastructure.

overrepresentation—in Egyptian politics. Novel technologies like the printing press and railroad were the adhesive that joined these three disparate groups together.

It is easy to overlook the voices of popular dissent that emerged in the overlap between khedival and British repression. A glance at the landscape of Egyptian history tells one continuous story of Egyptian autocracy, a narrative that continues into the twenty-first century. But the Urabi Revolt, as supported by an outspoken (albeit persecuted) press and a long-afflicted peasantry, interrupts this narrative. Popular will had finally broken the back of the khedive and might have prevailed but for the intervention of Great Britain.

Egypt began to transition into a modern state with the reforms of Pasha Muhammad Ali in the first half of the nineteenth century. Ali turned Egypt from an underdeveloped land into a semi-industrialized one with budding infrastructure and a high standard of education. The Ottoman Sultan allowed his Egyptian vassal state a long leash to develop independently, provided Egypt cede ultimate political and military authority to Istanbul. But Muhammad Ali's limitless ambition led him to trample on this unwritten rule when he invaded Syria in 1831.² This direct challenge to Ottoman rule over Egypt so alarmed the Sultan that he welcomed a British intervention to thwart Ali and preserve the regional balance of power. By the time Muhammad Ali's reign ended in 1848, Egypt featured prominently in both European and Ottoman foreign policy interests. European attention to Egypt would only intensify with the latter's integration into the world economy.

The cotton boom of the 1860s wove Egypt into the tapestry of global capitalism, accounting for 70 to 80 percent of Egypt's exports in the late 1860s and early 1870s.³ Muhammad Ali's successors Said (r.1854-1863) and Ismail (1863-1879) used these windfall profits to continue their predecessor's push to modernize Egypt. To finish the Suez Canal and finance other infrastructure projects, such as railroad lines, bridges, and roads, Ismail borrowed his way to bankruptcy. Debt collection allowed Europeans a foothold in the khedive's cabinet, one that became increasingly

visible to the public in the years before Ahmad Urabi marched on the khedive's palace.⁴

Among the myriad consequences of the cotton boom in Egypt was a huge increase in per-capita income for propertied peasants and village headsmen. This gave them a greater stake in the Egyptian economic and political system than they had held as subsistence farmers.⁵ This increased wealth was partly enabled by Khedives Said and Ismail themselves. They gradually loosened the state's grip on property ownership so that rural landowners began competing with the central government for land. In 1878 Ismail officially abolished forced peasant labor so that across the rural hierarchy, from landed elite to peasant, seeds of empowerment were being sown.⁶

A greater stake in Egyptian society led to a more active political consciousness on the part of peasants and the landed elite. Here again the khedive had a causal role. In response to the mounting debt crisis, Ismail convened a Chamber of Deputies in 1866. The chamber included a village headman representing each rural district.⁷ While Ismail drew up the chamber as a purely consultative body to help him reap greater tax revenue, village headsmen saw it as an unprecedented seat at the viceroy's table. According to Juan Cole's study of the catalysts of the Urabi Revolt, these village headsmen would play "an important role in mobilizing resources during the 1882 revolution."⁸ These notables were in close communication with Urabi's circle as the coalition's challenge to the khedive gathered steam.

While a further rung down on the societal ladder than their headsmen, Egyptian peasants were not without a political consciousness in the years preceding the Urabi Revolt. As previously mentioned, Said and Ismail's push for modernization extended deep into the Egyptian hinterland. Infrastructure projects enlisted peasant labor so that the state and peasant were in ever-closer contact. While the physical space between government officials and peasants closed, there remained a great deal of social space between the lowly peasant and the mighty khedive. To bridge this hierarchical gap, peasants harnessed the Ottoman system of petitioning.

Many historians dismiss peasant petitions during the reigns of Ismail and Tawfiq as ineffectual ripples in a bureaucracy. Given their history of marginalization, it is easy to conclude that peasants were helpless grist for their tyrant's mill. The viceroys of nineteenth century Egypt used them as laborers for their grand projects, and the Turco-Circassian elite looked upon native Egyptians with viscous condescension, calling them "*pis-fellah*" or "dirty peasant."⁹ But a close inspection of these petitions reveals them to be more than mere formalities.

John Chalcraft's study of these primary documents highlights the peasants' use of political discourse in directly appealing to the khedive for justice. Chalcraft looked at four different groups of peasants from Lower Egypt that petitioned the khedive in the 1870s. Their grievances include protests over the results of village elections and unfair taxation.¹⁰ Peasants took great personal risks in submitting these petitions. The village mayor or headsman often threatened violence to dissenters. Nonetheless, many peasants braved these dangers to tell their stories to petition writers.

The petitions studied by Chalcraft employed all of the obligatory honorifics in appealing to the khedive's benevolence. The peasants' repeated professions of loyalty to the khedive allowed them to be vehemently critical of their local overlords.¹¹ At the same time, however, the peasants redefined the petition's wording on their own terms. One petition starts by outlining what the central government stands to lose from local corruption and then outlines what they, the people, stand to lose. Another one refers to "the will of the people," and in at least one case the word "equality" is used.¹² That these concepts entered popular discourse in such a hierarchical autocracy was no small development. This dramatic declaration from an Egyptian newspaper in July 1869 does not overstate the moment: "The Egyptian *fallah* has begun to emerge from the silence of slavery which he has been mired in for centuries and started to supplicate [the powers that be] with complaints,

something not yet seen in Egypt."¹³ All these grand appeals to the compassion of the khedive would make it all the more disappointing for the peasants when Tawfiq revealed himself to be self-interested and pusillanimous.¹⁴

In making the trip to town to find a petition writer, peasants interacted with the social group that made up the second pillar of the Urabi coalition, the intelligentsia. The term intelligentsia loosely refers to the educated middle class of Egypt, consisting of both Syrian immigrants and native Egyptians. This paper will focus on a group of intellectuals who helped cultivate a political consciousness among Egyptians through a fledgling Arabic press. As was the case with peasant petitions, a careful reading of the intellectual milieu in khedival Egypt refutes the notion of the Urabi Revolt as a military munity disconnected

The peasants' repeated professions of loyalty to the khedive allowed them to be vehemently critical of their local overlords.

from the people.

Egypt's population exploded in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1850 and 1880 the populations of Cairo and Alexandria increased by 40 percent.¹⁵ Rural Egypt became less rural as villages grew to towns and towns to cities. Out of both sheer physical proximity and the advent of technological change, Egyptians became connected like never before. The railroad cut travel time between Cairo to Alexandria from four days to eight hours.¹⁶ The arrival of the telegraph and printing press in Egypt were two important pieces in the transformation of communication in khedival Egypt.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, only 1 percent of Egyptians were literate. Reading was an elite endeavor and people received news by word of mouth. But by 1880, literacy had increased to 4 to 5 percent of the population.¹⁷ While this may still seem a small number, the means of disseminating information (through the press and telegraph) had changed so much in 80 years that far more than 4 to 5 percent of the population was kept apprised of political developments. Juan Cole describes this segment as a "critical mass of literate persons in vital

employment sectors, (which allowed) them to establish not only urban networks, but truly national linkages with the literate in other regions and occupations, all of which could be mobilized for political purposes."¹⁸

The printing press first arrived in Egypt via the French at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it was not until the decade before the Urabi Revolt that it began to leave its mark on the Arabic speaker. The openness of Alexandria as a Mediterranean port city brought to it a steady flow of Syrian immigrants in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These immigrants were generally well-educated entrepreneurs seeking respite from the restrictive atmosphere in Syria under Sultan Abdul Hamid. Given their skill set and the cheap cost of setting up a printing press, publishing was a natural vocation.¹⁹ Albert Hourani estimates that of the 61 newspapers published in Alexandria between 1873 and 1900, 31 were under Syrian names.²⁰

One of these names was Adib Ishaq, who arrived in Egypt in 1876 at the age of 20.²¹ Ishaq was a Greek Catholic from Damascus who wanted to bring liberal ideas of politics and expression to the Egyptian public through his newspaper, *Misr al-Qahira*.²² A contemporary Egyptian novelist named Jurji Zaydan described Ishaq's *Misr al-Qahira* as one of the "pillars in the evolution of Egyptian journalism, carrying the level of intellectual debate forward through (its) use of unprecedented direct language."²³ Ishaq was thus a leading figure in an Egyptian press that became increasingly vocal with regards to politics in the late 1870s. In the spring of 1879, Ishaq ran an article in a fellow Syrian's paper calling for the restoration of the Chamber of Deputies.²⁴ The authoritarian Prime Minister Riyad Pasha had Ishaq deported shortly thereafter.²⁵ The Syrian would return to Egypt in 1881 in the wake of the November elections brought about by the Urabist opposition. But his dream of a liberal democratic Egypt would fall tragically short.

One man who wielded even greater influence in intellectual circles than Ishaq was Sayyid Jamalud-Din, better known as al-Afghani. This well-traveled Persian was both a philosopher

of Islam and a strident anti-imperialist. He arrived in Cairo sometime in the 1870s and began drawing crowds of impressionable young Egyptians at coffee shops with his meditations on Islam and governance. Al-Afghani saw a vibrant press as essential for propagating his ideas. He arranged a newspaper license for Ishaq and many other ascendant journalists in Egypt and inspired protests for greater independence from both Istanbul and Europe.²⁶ Like Ishaq, al-Afghani's would have limited time in the vassal state before being shown the door by the authorities. But al-Afghani had already achieved what he came for in Egypt, namely an awakening of the political consciousness through journalism.

Egypt's nascent political press adjusted its language to its audience. Yaqub Sannu, the Egyptian Jew who founded the satirical *Abu Naddara* ("The Bespectacled One") in 1877, wrote in a colloquial Arabic familiar to the masses. His caustic treatment of Ismail would see him banished to France a year later, but Sannu's societal impact was lasting. A Swiss observer named John Ninet noted that, in the late 1870s, "there was hardly a donkey boy of Cairo, or any of the provincial towns, who had not heard" Sannu's paper read aloud.²⁷ Sannu was also a skilled political organizer. Since there were no political parties in the nineteenth century, salons and clubs carried more political significance.²⁸ Sannu formed the "Society of Lovers of Knowledge" in 1875, a secret society with a liberal political bent that was allegedly frequented by Ahmad Urabi himself.²⁹

Abdullah al-Nadim, one of Sannu's friends and collaborators, was perhaps the most influential in shifting the style in Egypt from literary to political journalism. In the fall of 1881, Al-Nadim moved his daily, *at-Taif* ("The Rover") from Alexandria to Cairo and offered it as a platform to the Urabists.³⁰ A few months prior, Al-Nadim had proved crucial in helping circulate the Urabist petition calling for the dismissal of the Riyad government to rural notables.³¹ Like Sannu, al-Nadim was a native Egyptian who cultivated a connection with the commoner. Al-Nadim described the writing style of his periodical as one "which the educated will not despise and the

ignorant will not need to have explained.”³² This reflects the general sense of duty that imbued journalists during this time. They understood that, with the encroachment of Europeans into the Nile Valley and the Ottoman Sultan’s dalliance with constitutionalism, the Egyptian public relied on their reporting to an unprecedented degree. As Elisabeth Kendall observes, despite the low literacy in Egypt, the literate felt a “sense of cultural and political responsibility” and were “aware of themselves as members of an educated elite.”³³ It was an upward struggle against the heavy hand of khedival censorship.

The irony of the press’s role in the Urabi Revolt is that Ismail had, to some degree, helped the press along in its early days. The khedive gave subsidies to a group of Syrian journalists on a visit to Beirut in the 1860s, perhaps some of the very same journalists who would emigrate to Egypt and found outlets critical of him.³⁴ Ismail also provided subventions to a host of foreign journals and news agencies stationed in Egypt.³⁵ He welcomed the image of an independent press but ultimately demanded its loyalty to him. But the influx of liberal ideas carried by the press soon clashed with this unwritten rule. The titles of some of the publications critical of the khedive sought to rouse the national spirit; ‘Young Egypt,’ ‘Modern Era,’ and ‘Homeland,’ Ami Ayalon writes, “were more than just names, they were battle cries.”³⁶ And while it was ultimately European pressure on Istanbul that deposed Ismail in 1879, these nationalistic publications created a public clamoring that could not be ignored.

Although the British would take a more tolerant view towards the press as occupiers of Egypt, they urged the khedive to stamp out pro-Urabist papers as discontent with the regime grew. British Consul General Edward Malet lobbied for the anti-imperialist al-Hijaz to be shut down and so it was in due time.³⁷ However, as in the military and police cadres, sympathy with the Urabist cause forced cracks in the government’s campaign of propaganda. Muhammad Abduh, a prominent disciple of al-Afghani working in the Publication Department, discreetly eased censorship of pro-Urabist papers so that the

Europeans “found it much more difficult to suppress the culture of critical discourse.”³⁸ This clash in interests between those of colonial Britain on one hand and those of the Urabist coalition on the other widened the chasm between the khedive and the Egyptian people and set the stage for a historic confrontation between the two sides in the spring of 1882.

The memoirs of two British contemporaries of Ahmed Urabi offer fascinating glimpses into the latter’s character.³⁹ Evelyn Baring, also known as Lord Cromer, was the man who would rule Egypt on behalf of Britain for a quarter century after it quelled the revolt. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt was a former officer in the British Foreign Service and a witness, in an unofficial role, to the revolt.

These men held opposing biases when it came to Urabi and Egypt. In his memoirs, Cromer nods favorably to Lord Dufferin’s statement, in reference to Egypt, that “a long-enslaved nation instinctively craves for the hand of a strong master, rather than a lax constitutional regime.”⁴⁰ Cromer considered Egypt a backward land best handled with severity. He repeatedly refers to the Urabists as mutineers and depicts them as having inchoate nationalist aspirations that did not enjoy the support of the Egyptian people. After British troops captured Urabi, Cromer preferred that he be swiftly court martialed and executed but opted for the charade of a public trial so as not to appear too despotic.

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt was a different man altogether. He greatly admired Urabi’s affinity with the people. Blunt looked on the Urabists as a source of optimism for Egypt’s future. He also held Islam in a much higher regard than Cromer, who trembled for India when he wrote of the “Mohammedan fanaticism” that he felt the Egyptian papers were inciting. Blunt serves as a fascinating primary source because he went to great lengths to arrange a defense for Urabi at his trial and corresponded with the defendant frequently. Upon Urabi’s return to Egypt in 1901,

The irony of the press’s role in the Urabi Revolt is that Ismail had, to some degree, helped the press along in its early days.

he dictated what Blunt calls an autobiography to the Englishman (Blunt spoke Arabic, while Cromer did not).

So despite being two men of very different political persuasions and sympathies towards the Urabists, their accounts of events depict Ahmad Urabi as the “delegate of the people” he claimed to be. Urabi was born in a peasant village near Zagazig, Lower Egypt in 1840.⁴¹ Blunt’s physical description of Urabi, while over-the-top, marks the future colonel as clearly of peasant stock:

Arabi (sic) was...singularly well endowed for the part he was called upon to play in Egyptian history as representative of his race. A typical *fellah*, tall, heavy-limbed, and somewhat slow in his movements, he seemed to symbolize that massive bodily strength which is so characteristic of the laborious peasant of the Lower Nile...With his own peasant class his rusticity was all in his favor. He was one of themselves, they perceived, but with their special qualities intensified and made glorious by the power they credited him with.⁴²

Urabi enrolled in Egypt’s greatest institution for religious learning, Al Ahzar, but left the seminary at age fourteen to join the army. Said had opened the military to native Egyptians and Urabi came to see it as a meritocracy.⁴³ But discrimination against the *fellah* would return under Ismail and leave Urabi embittered. Blunt’s “autobiography” of Urabi quotes him as saying: “Said Pasha’s death was a great misfortune to me and to all, as he was favorable to the children of the country. Ismail was quite otherwise. The Egyptians in the army got no protection and no promotion. In his time everything was put back into the hands of the Turks and the Circassians.”⁴⁴ At the age of fourteen, Urabi became Egypt’s youngest colonel ever. He would not receive another promotion for the entirety of Ismail’s reign.⁴⁵

The return of Turco-Circassian favoritism in the military coincided with European favoritism in both the public and private sectors. The state used money from the cotton boom to hire European mechanics, teachers and engineers so

that native Egyptians were shut out of the better paying jobs.⁴⁶ Such was the infiltration of Europeans in the Egyptian bureaucracy that they made up two percent of state employees, but took in fifteen percent of the payroll.⁴⁷ By 1880, there were some 90 to 100 thousand Europeans in Egypt.⁴⁸ Their conspicuous presence stoked tension with native Egyptians. Ethnic riots became more commonplace, and the Europeans pressured the khedive to keep order. The Egyptian government responded by hiring European officers and police sergeants at the expense of the *fellah*.⁴⁹ It was the same double standard that applied to press censorship, and the khedive was having a hard time casting himself as being on the side of the Egyptian people. Ismail did not help his cause by reinstating the police beatings banned by Said.⁵⁰ As Juan Cole has rightly concluded, “the police and the Ministry of Interior sent a clear message that they served the propertied and the foreigner.”⁵¹ A suppressive khedive beholden to foreigners contrasted spectacularly in the eyes of the people with the constitutionalists who cried “Egypt for Egyptians!”

While Urabi was certainly influenced by the liberal intellectual wing of his coalition, he was, at heart, a military man. What drove him to rebellion was not any new vision for an Egyptian state. He swore allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan and was several times decorated by him.⁵² The flashpoint for Ahmad Urabi was rather an institutionalized discrimination that had held the *fellah* back for centuries. Native Egyptians were not allowed to rise above their lowly stations to defend their land. The consequences of this bureaucratic ceiling came to bear in Abyssinia in 1876, where King John handed the Egyptian army a humiliating defeat.⁵³ The returning soldiers were greeted with the news that many of them would be discharged from the military to help service the debt. In 1874, there were 90 thousand Egyptian troops stationed domestically and 30 thousand in the Sudan. By the summer of 1879, the total number of troops had dwindled to 12 thousand.⁵⁴ The Dual Control had made the military a chief target of its fiscal austerity. Tens of thousands of

fellah lost their jobs because of a policy dictated by Europeans and rubber-stamped by the khedive.

Whereas Ismail had been authoritarian and unyielding, his successor Tawfiq enjoyed no such reputation among his subjects. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt describes Tawfiq as having “grown up in the harem more than with men and had been unable to rid himself of a certain womanish timidity which prompted him always to yield his opinion in the presence of a stronger will than his own...He had, too, a large share of the womanish quality of jealousy and of the love of small vengeance.”⁵⁵ Blunt’s emphasis on masculinity aside, Tawfiq’s jealous and indecisive qualities would dictate the government’s response to the Urabist challenge. And whereas Ismail had, to some degree, stood tall against European control of Egypt, Tawfiq laid down before the French and British in ignominy. The Europeans reestablished “Dual Control” under the new khedive with an even tighter grip on Egyptian administration than before.⁵⁶

Shortly before acceding the throne, Tawfiq courted the constitutionalists by promising to reconvene the Chamber of Deputies.⁵⁷ Once in power, khedive continued his dance with the constitutionalists by appointing one of their own, Sharif Pasha, as his prime minister in 1879.⁵⁸ It was not long, however, before the khedive reneged under British pressure and installed the autocratic Riyad in Sharif’s place. Equally dismaying for Urabi and his supporters was Tawfiq’s appointment of Uthman Rifqi as minister of war. Rifqi began his tenure by dismissing several native Egyptian officers from the army.⁵⁹ Here was a fresh effort by the Turco-Circassians to disenfranchise the *fellah*, and what better man to oppose them than Ahmad Urabi, an Egyptian who claimed direct lineage to the Prophet?⁶⁰

The Urabi Revolt featured a symbolic confrontation between native Egyptians and Mamluks. Urabi became a repository for *fellah*

hopes to unshackle themselves from Mamluk social and European oppression. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the *fellah* saw Urabi as a “savior,” as historian Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot puts it.⁶¹ And after his initial success in getting the khedive to make concessions to his coalition, Urabi, according to Blunt, “began to be talked of in the provinces as ‘*el wahhid*,’ the ‘only one’...for he was the only man of purely *fellah* origin who had for centuries been able to resist successfully the tyranny of the reigning Turco-Circassian caste.”⁶² Urabi was aware of the mantle he assumed. Popular support emboldened him with a righteousness that the khedive sorely lacked.

Urban elites and rural landowners from the voided Chamber of Deputies reached out to Urabi, who welcomed the alliance, as it justified his self-declared title of “delegate of the people,” rather than simply “leader of the army.”

This first phase of the revolt was marked by a convergence of the pro-Urabi coalition. Urban elites and rural landowners from the voided Chamber of Deputies reached out to Urabi, who welcomed the alliance, as it justified his self-declared title of “delegate of the people,” rather than simply “leader of the army.”⁶³

In January 1881, Urabi and a few of his fellow officers learned that they were about to be dismissed as part of Minister Rifqi’s cutbacks in the army. With

their demands in place, on February 1 Urabi and his colleagues went straight to Prime Minister Riyad. Their petition demanded that the government increase the size of the army to 18 thousand troops and that a native Egyptian be installed as minister of war.⁶⁴ Riyad rejected the petition out of hand and had Urabi and two other officers arrested and detained. But members of the khedival unit stormed the ministry of war and freed the detainees, who then marched straight to the khedive’s palace.⁶⁵ Tawfiq convened an emergency session of his cabinet, which included the British and French financial controllers. The khedive agreed to fire Rifqi as minister of war and made some concessions to the officers in the terms of pay and service.⁶⁶ But these concessions from Tawfiq were ultimately nothing more than a sop to the Urabist coalition. In July of 1881 he reversed

course by dismissing the reformist cabinet and installing Dawud Pasha, a man with a renowned prejudice against the *fellah*, as minister of war.

The Urabists were intent on a demonstration of their growing popularity. On September 9, 1881, Urabi and his men marched on Abdin Square in front of the royal palace. In this, the second phase of the revolt, Urabi's demands more reflected those of his broad coalition. Included in the new petition was a call to reconvene the Chamber of Deputies as well as a cabinet headed by Sharif Pasha. After reciting these demands to Tawfiq in Abdin Palace, Urabi claims that an exchange between the khedive and him went something like this:⁶⁷

Tawfiq: "I am khedive of the country and I shall do as I please."

Urabi: "We are not slaves, and shall never from this day forth be inherited."

These bold words echo an earlier exchange between Urabi and Riyad when the former compared Egypt's governance by eight ministers to "a woman born but eight sons and then been barren."⁶⁸ Europeans gave short shrift to Urabi's oratory gifts. Samuel de Kusel, an Englishman who would become head of the Customs Administration in Egypt, painted Urabi as a demagogue without ever hearing him speak. "I surmise that he mouthed out fine-sounding sonorous sentences, unintelligible to himself as well as to his hearers, and, naturally enough, as the latter did not understand him, they applauded."⁶⁹ But Urabi was no mere demagogue. His time at Al Azar endowed him with scriptural knowledge that he deployed skillfully when speaking to the pious. Like the intellectuals Sannu and al-Nadim, Urabi spoke the tongue of the masses, a concise and moralistic language that made clear who stood for them and who did not.

Tawfiq was wrong-footed by Urabi's march on his palace. He did not expect soldiers of the Sultan to act with such audacity, and his response was to acquiesce to Urabi's demands. The new cabinet was installed and the new chamber convened. The constitutionalists rejoiced, and there was a buzz of optimism about the Egyptian capital. Blunt, who was on-hand for these new

political developments, wrote this account of the popular reaction to the constitutionalists' victory: "It is literally true that in the streets of Cairo men stopped each other, though strangers, to embrace and rejoice together at the astonishing new reign of liberty which had suddenly begun for them, like the dawn of day after a long night of fear."⁷⁰ Talk of a new reign of liberty was excessive to say the least, but Blunt effectively captures the lifting of spirits that occurred among Egyptians as one of their own challenged the stifling status quo.

The new Chamber of Deputies submitted a draft constitution to the khedive in January 1882, which he promulgated the next month.⁷¹ The reformist cabinet took office with Urabi as minister of war. But proof that this was no "new reign of liberty" abounded. Urabi turned a blind eye to the torture of Turco-Circassian officers accused of plotting his assassination. The British and French grew increasingly skeptical about Tawfiq's ability to quash the Urabists. The policy options seemed to narrow before the Europeans as they considered their vital interests. The British simply could not lose the Suez since 89 percent of the shipping through the canal was theirs.⁷² The French had a longer history in Egypt and did not want to see Britain gain a dominant position. The two European powers issued a joint communiqué in January 1882 that stated unequivocal support for the khedive "against all internal or external threats to order in Egypt."⁷³ This transparent threat to Urabi and the Egyptians who supported him only served to put further distance between the khedive and the people.

Recognizing his low standing with his subjects, Tawfiq retreated to his summer residence in Alexandria to be closer to his allies in the event of a European intervention.⁷⁴ He arrived just in time for a brawl-turned-riot on June 11 that left some 250 Egyptians and 50 Europeans dead.⁷⁵ The British press went beyond sensationalism in reporting the event as an "Urabist massacre of Christians."⁷⁶ London was very reluctant to begin a formal occupation of Egypt, a land mired in debt and plagued by unrest. But this creeping fear of losing the Suez to "Mohammedan fanatics" in the end convinced the British leadership to attempt what it had in India, to make order out of

chaos. On July 11, 1882, the British set their cannons on Alexandria and the city erupted in flames.⁷⁷

Despite some high-profile defections from his coalition, Urabi and his army maintained a broad base of support in their fight against the British. The landed and urban elites and *ulama*, or Muslim scholars, were still behind him, as were the thousands of peasant volunteers who offered to join the fight.⁷⁸ More striking was the support offered by some of the khedive's family. No less a symbolic figure than Princess Nazl, Muhammad Ali's granddaughter, described her empathy with Urabi this way: "Arabi (sic) was the first Egyptian Minister who made the Europeans obey him. In his time at least the Mohammedans held up their heads, and the Greeks and Italians did not dare transgress the law."⁷⁹ Another princess revealed that the royal family "secretly sympathized from the first with Arabi because we knew he sought only the good for all Egyptians...We saw in Arabi a deliverer, and our enthusiasm for him knew no bounds."⁸⁰

But the sympathies of the people were soon drowned in the din of British artillery. British forces secured the Suez Canal and were marching on Cairo when Urabi's troops tried to stop them short in the desert at Tall al-Kabir. Here, as day broke on September 13, Britain extinguished the Urabi Revolt for good and with it the embers of a participatory government in Egypt indefinitely.

Britain would remain Egypt's puppeteer until Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in 1952. Hypothetical questions write a parallel history that might have unfolded instead. What if Khedive Tawfiq had supported the Urabists unconditionally? What if the constitutionalists had remained in power and made Britain recognize their government as one that enjoyed popular support? While British financial control of Egypt may have been inevitable, a British invasion was not. Had London struck a compromise with the constitutionalists that

allowed them to remain in power but also reassured Britain of its financial interests and safeguarded the Suez, the results might have been different. The liberal politics of al-Afghani and Adib Ishaq might have taken firmer root in Egypt. Under the shadow of imperial Britain there might have grown a steady tradition of participatory government. And dissidents in Egypt today might be able to take greater stock in the achievements of their forefathers.

The protagonists of this epoch still resonate. Although his reputation initially suffered for triggering the British occupation, Ahmad Urabi reassumed a heroic place in Egyptian lore after the last of the Mamluk line was overthrown by Nasser.⁸¹ For their part, the dissident writers of the Urabi coalition have had a lasting impact on Egyptian literature. In particular, Abdullah al-Nadim has inspired recent attempts to revitalize Egyptian journalism.⁸² And the legacy of British colonialism has loomed large in the minds of both nationalists and Islamists in modern Egypt. Many Egyptians viewed President Hosni Mubarak's close relationship with the West through

that same prism of colonial indebtedness.

So while many remember the characters in the Urabist drama, few remember the societal power that this movement carried. To enlist the peasant, urban merchant, Syrian intellectual, and native Egyptian army officer, among others, in a challenge to the Ottoman khedive's legitimacy was a remarkable achievement. It took the charisma of Ahmad Urabi, the advent of modernization in Egypt and the indignation of a people marginalized in their own land to bring about this movement. The Urabi Revolt was ultimately an attempt to imagine Egypt in another guise, one that took the needs of its people seriously. While this guise may have been smashed to pieces by the British, its silhouette has not faded from Egyptian history.

AFTERWARD

The Urabi Revolt was ultimately an attempt to imagine Egypt in another guise, one that took the needs of its people seriously. While this guise may have been smashed to pieces by the British, its silhouette has not faded from Egyptian history.

The recent toppling of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak defied long-held stereotypes about Egypt's politics and its people. The firm backing of the United States and a formidable Egyptian security apparatus were for thirty years safeguards to Mubarak's throne. But these two pillars of stability quickly dissolved at the feet of a popular movement remarkable for its maturity. Egyptians of all political persuasions took to the streets to defend their dignity. They did so mostly non-violently, non-ideologically, and even with a touch of civic duty (recall the Cairene youths who swept the sidewalk of Tahrir Square after a day of protest). Yet Mr. Mubarak refused to see the protesters as adults. He sought to retain his self-anointed writ as "Father of Egypt." If only the "sons and daughters of Egypt," as he addressed them in his last televised address, would go home, Mubarak could get back to work in building them a better future. Such brazen exclusion of an entire people from governing recalled an earlier time when the Egyptian *fellah* was not allowed to rise above his

lowly rank. Ahmad Urabi had the temerity to upend this order, to assert his dignity at the risk of violent reprisal. His descendants made this same brave choice last month in Tahrir Square.

Many commentators in the West delighted in the secular rather than Islamist nature of the opposition in Egypt. The feared Muslim Brotherhood had no discernable hand in dethroning Mubarak. But to express surprise at this development is to forget Egypt's tradition of liberal thought—to forget the great intellectuals who made the Urabi Revolt possible. No amount of censorship, whether from the Ottoman khedive or Hosni Mubarak, could completely extinguish the flame of free thought that the printing press brought to Egypt in the 1870s.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

Works Cited

- ¹ Historians commonly describe the race of people that had come to dominate the Egyptian government and civil service as “Turco-Circassian.” This label is interchangeable with Ottoman in that it distinguishes a race of Turks from the native Arab Egyptians, or *fellah*.
- ² Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 76.
- ³ Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East - Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's Urabi Movement*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 59.
- ⁴ The British and French established “Dual Control” in 1876, whereby a financial controller from each country sat in the khedive’s cabinet. The Dual Control oversaw half of Egypt’s budget from this point on. (Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot *Egypt and Cromer*. (London: Butler & Tanner, 1968), 3-4.
- ⁵ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 66.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 64.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 65.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 65.
- ⁹ The construction of the Suez Canal, for example, cost 100,000 Egyptian workers their lives. See Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *A History of Egypt – from Arab Conquest to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 79. See also Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot. *Egypt and Cromer*. (London: Butler & Tanner, 1968), 7.
- ¹⁰ John Chalcraft, “Engaging the State Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Vol. 37, Issue 03. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 307.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 309.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 317.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 306.
- ¹⁴ In detailing these peasant petitions, I do not mean to imply that they constituted some sort of mass movement against their rural overlords. Rather, as John Chalcraft convincingly argues, these petitions reveal neither apathy nor rebellion on the part of the peasant but a pragmatic engagement with Egyptian bureaucracy. The ultimate role of the peasant in the Urabi Revolt was one of solidarity but not mass rebellion.
- ¹⁵ Juan Cole, *Colonials and Revolution in the Middle East*, 112.
- ¹⁶ Juan Cole, *Colonials and Revolution in the Middle East*, 112.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, 114.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114-115.
- ¹⁹ Elisabeth Kendall, “Between Politics and Literature: Journals in Alexandria and Istanbul at the end of the 19th Century,” in *Modernity and Culture*, ed. C.A. Bayly and Leila Fawaz. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 335.
- ²⁰ Albert Hourani, “The Syrians in Egypt in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Colloque International Sur L’Histoire du Caire*. (Cairo: Ministry of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 1972), 229.
- ²¹ Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 44.
- ²² *Ibid*, 49.
- ²³ Kendall, “Between Politics and Literature,” 336.
- ²⁴ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 144.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 130.
- ²⁶ Kendall, “Between Politics and Literature,” 335.

- ²⁷ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 124.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 135.
- ²⁹ Ibid, 137.
- ³⁰ Kendall, "Between Politics and Literature," 337.
- ³¹ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 261.
- ³² Kendall, "Between Politics and Literature," 337.
- ³³ Ibid, 342.
- ³⁴ Hourani, "The Syrians in Egypt," 227.
- ³⁵ Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*. 41.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 45.
- ³⁷ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 231.
- ³⁸ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 230-31.
- ³⁹ Secondary sources such as the work of Cole, Rogan, and Chalcraft draw on original documents in Arabic such as Urabi's memoirs.
- ⁴⁰ Evelyn Baring Cromer, *Modern Egypt*. Vol. V Part I. (London: Routledge, 2000), 343.
- ⁴¹ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *A Secret History of the British Occupation of Egypt* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1907), 367.
- ⁴² Blunt, *A Secret History*, 106.
- ⁴³ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 124.
- ⁴⁴ Blunt, *A Secret History*, 368.
- ⁴⁵ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 124.
- ⁴⁶ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 192-193.
- ⁴⁷ al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt and Cromer*, 5.
- ⁴⁸ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 44.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 216.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 215.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 216.
- ⁵² Rogan, *The Arabs*, 127.
- ⁵³ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 125.
- ⁵⁴ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 218.
- ⁵⁵ Blunt, *A Secret History of the British Occupation of Egypt*, 96.
- ⁵⁶ al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt and Cromer*, 4-5.
- ⁵⁷ al-Sayyid-Marsot, *A History of Egypt*. 85.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, 85.
- ⁵⁹ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 125.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 123.
- ⁶¹ al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt and Cromer*, 6.
- ⁶² Blunt, *A Secret History of the British Occupation of Egypt*, 110.
- ⁶³ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 127.
- ⁶⁴ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 126.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, 126.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, 126.
- ⁶⁷ Blunt, *A Secret History of the British Occupation of Egypt*, 114.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 371.

⁶⁹ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 46-47.

⁷⁰ Blunt, *A Secret History of the British Occupation of Egypt*, 117.

⁷¹ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 128.

⁷² al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt and Cromer*, 2.

⁷³ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 129.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 129.

⁷⁵ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, 239.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 239.

⁷⁷ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 130.

⁷⁸ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 131.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 132.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 131-32.

⁸¹ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 132.

⁸² The poet Muhammad Ibrahim Mubarak named his journal, established in 1980, *al-Nadim*. One of Mubarak's contemporaries, Ahmad Rayyan, has paid tribute to Nadim's work as a model for interacting with the Egyptian public. Kendall, "Between Politics and Literature," 337.