

The socialists and Communists, who should logically have led the struggle against British imperialism, were divided into many groups, whose activities were limited almost entirely to intellectual and trade union circles in the big cities. The Communists, with the exception of one group, the HADETO, looked with suspicion upon a revolution carried out by a handful of men who had no ideology and little or no political experience, and had to rely upon professional politicians of the bad old days.

The Free Officers and the bulk of the people had, however, lost faith in the effectiveness of political parties that, whether of the right or left, had little to show for all their theorizing.

"We must decide at once what philosophy of government we are going to follow," Nasser announced at the first meeting of the Free Officers' executive committee immediately after Farouk's departure on July 26, 1952. He insisted that the decision must be reached that very night whether Egypt was to be ruled by democracy or dictatorship. All but one of the eight members of the nine-man committee present at the meeting voted for dictatorship. The exception was Nasser himself.

Whether Nasser's call for democracy reflected his inner convictions is open to debate. His detractors saw it as a gimmick to enlist popularity. His defenders believed in his sincerity and held that the subsequent drift into dictatorship was the inevitable result of the political confusion in the country and the struggle for power, which posed a threat to the revolution from the outset.

The sincere or proclaimed desire to establish democracy faced the many pitfalls of a multitude of parties, each with its own vision of how to rule the country. This was Nasser's dilemma. To have handed over to these competing factions would have led to chaos, his Free Officers reasoned. The only way to secure the revolution was through a period of military dictatorship.

A series of incidents followed by political trials justified, in the eyes of the populace, the removal of all organized political opposition. Communists were held responsible for the August 1952 riots, in which workers seized control of a textile factory near Alexandria. Troops were sent in to restore order. Nine people were killed and 20 injured in the clashes that followed. After a court-martial, two agitators were sentenced to death and hanged the following day. By the end of 1954, 200 leading Communists were serving long sentences. Similarly, student riots in the early days of

1953 led to the arrest of leading politicians including army officers, Communists and Muslim Brothers, on charges of plotting overthrow the Government, inciting mutiny, subversion and corruption.

The fact having been established that the regime was facing disruptive opposition from the different political factions, the next logical step was to abolish the parties. On January 19, 1953, all parties with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood which was reprieved as a religious organization, were ordered to dissolve and hand over their funds. In October 1954, the Brotherhood, too, was banned after one of its members attempted to assassinate Nasser. The would-be assassin fired shots (all of which missed their mark) while Nasser was speaking at a rally in Alexandria. About 18,000 of the Brethren were arrested. Seven were sentenced to death but the Supreme Guide, Hassan Hodeiby, was reprieved and given a life sentence.

In the meantime, in June 1953, the monarchy had been abolished, and Egypt had become a republic. On January 28, 1953, Mohammed Neguib had announced that a new political organization, the Liberation Rally, would replace the dissolved political parties and that Gamal Abdel Nasser would be its Secretary General. Then, on February 10, a provisional constitution had vested supreme authority in the leader of the revolution and the military committee.

Power to Nasser

All these steps were paving the way for Nasser to assume power openly. But first he had to get rid of Neguib, who was demanding more effective authority if not absolute control, and with whom he was involved in a power struggle. Neguib was no revolutionary; deeply conservative, he was at most a moderate reformer. There was an unbridgeable gap between this middle senior officer and the young revolutionaries who had raised him as their flag. He regarded them as rash and irresponsible, and their actions as ill-advised.

The masses who acclaimed Neguib were, in reality, acclaiming the actions of the rash anonymous young leader for whom he was a stand-in. To have handed over to Neguib would certainly have appeared to the people to have been a betrayal of their long struggle. Conveniently, the trial of the Muslim Brothers revealed a connection between Neguib and the Brotherhood. He was dismissed on November 14, 1954, and placed under house arrest. Nasser emerged as effective head of state and president of the council of the revolution.

Motives behind call for democracy subject to interpretation