

The 'Nasserization' of Egypt and its reversal under Sadat

By Irene Beeson

When the late Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Free Officers came to power on July 23, 1952, one of the trickiest among the many tasks facing them was that of dealing with Egypt's political structure. Egypt had been under foreign rule continuously since the second Persian invasion of 343-342 B.C. With the overthrow of King Farouk, whose son would have continued the line of Turco-Albanian rulers, the traditional structure had collapsed. "We must pave the way to a new era, in which the people will enjoy their sovereignty and live in dignity..." Nasser wrote in a note to General Mohammed Neguib on the eve of Farouk's abdication.

The aim of the Free Officers, stated in secret manifestoes before 1952 and openly proclaimed after the *coup*, was to set up a "clean, honest government", one that would work for the good of the people, not for the interests of the feudalists. These were fine words, with strong appeal for the mass of the people. For them, the Free Officers' Liberation Movement promised the end of appalling conditions of poverty, exploitation and subservience to foreigners.

The Free Officers were nominally under the leadership of Muhammad Neguib. It is reasonably clear, however, that Nasser had set Neguib up as a figurehead in order to leave himself a free hand to work in anonymity, behind the scenes, to pull Egypt into a shape that would fit its dependent status.

The liberation movement in modern Egypt dates from 1798, when the first popular uprising against the French occupation reawakened Egyptian nationalism and launched the long struggle for independence that ended in 1956. During the three-year French occupation, repeated uprisings and guerrilla conflicts produced a new breed of Egyptian, trained in armed combat, politically conscious and resolved to overthrow the British colonialists who succeeded the French for a period and later the Mamelukes, and finally to put an end to the British occupation that began in 1882.

Nasser was born in 1918. The following year saw a revolution in which Egyptians from all classes united in a nationwide movement for independence under the leadership of Saad Zaghloul, founder of the Wafd party. The 1919 revolt was one of a series of eruptions in a long, often-interrupted revolution, which achieved its main goal in 1955 with the expulsion of the British. By the time the Free Officers came to power in 1952, each of a number of parties and groups was convinced of its own claim to leadership in the new Egypt. The Wafd, the largest political party, had started out not so much as a party as a national front embracing all nationalist trends, from the extreme right to the extreme left. In time it became dominated by, and representative of, the ruling class of rich landowners, who sought accommodation with the British as a protection against the rising tide of revolution. Then, shortly after the 1952 *coup*, it split into several bickering groups.

The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, was a strong, cohesive organization, opposed both to the Wafdists, whom they considered traitors for having signed an agreement with the British in 1936, prolonging the military occupation, and to the "atheist" left. Though the Brotherhood gave the appearance of accepting the 1952 revolution, it was, in fact, working for the establishment of a state ruled by Koranic legislation.

Accommodation with British sought as protection from threat of revolution

Irene Beeson is a long-time resident of North Africa and the Middle East. A freelance journalist, she contributes regularly to The Observer and The Guardian. She is at present based in Cairo, but spends a great deal of her time travelling throughout the area. Her many articles deal with various aspects of affairs in North Africa and the Middle East. This is her first contribution to International Perspectives. The views expressed in this article are those of Miss Beeson.

