

Uprisings in an Ancient World

A historical treasure and a tourist paradise, Egypt and its sprawling capital city became the fulcrum of the Arab Spring. The success or failure of its revolution has colossal importance for the future of countries in the region—and stability in the world. By Ferry de Kerckhove

Egypt is an extraordinary country of 82 million people glued together along the Nile, a country that delights in remembering its 5,000 years of history. It is a multicultural, Coptic and Muslim country that claims its Arabic identity as a result of the post-Hegira Arabic conquests, a country that has more often been conquered or led by foreigners than it has stood as a conqueror in its own right. Egypt is a country that, over the course of its 700 years under the relatively strict influence of the Sublime Porte, became a vital colonial issue between the French—mostly remembered for Napoleon's flash-in-the-pan epic—and the English—whose commercial interests turned Egypt into a canal through the Middle East, with non-transferable control.

It is a country in which the misery of the fellahs (peasants and farmers) dates back to antiquity and still marks their history today. It is a country in which democracy has never been strongly anchored. This is demonstrated by Gamal Abdel Nasser's autocratic leadership, the more modernistic regime of President Anwar Sadat—who will mostly be remembered for his visit to Israel that led to the Camp David Accords and the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel—and the 30 years of President Hosni Mubarak's failure to act, until he was ousted this past February.

Egypt is a paradise for sun-seeking tourists because of its two seas, for experienced or neophyte archaeologists looking for remains, and for fans of the

desert. It is also a country of cacophonous noise, with multiple forms of pollution, disorder and unhealthiness, a country of huge traffic jams and glaring contrasts between shiny Mercedes and carts pulled by donkeys and horses, between pedestrians and undisciplined drivers.

Cairo, with its 22 million inhabitants, is a sprawling city that never sleeps, a city whose architecture and organization defy logic, a city that shelters entire civilizations: pharaonic, Christian and Muslim. Cairo is either a declaration of love or of hatred; there is no middle ground. But, as with every passion, exhaustion is the end result. Egypt has adopted and adapted French and Anglo-Saxon bureaucratic phenomena, adding some of its own Mediterranean flavour. Those who have the time may enjoy this, but it is often difficult to digest!

Our diplomatic relations with Egypt date back to 1954, after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The first Canadian ambassador arrived on November 18, 1954. The Suez Crisis in 1956 propelled relations between the two countries in new directions with the creation—at Lester B. Pearson's instigation—of the United Nations Emergency Force to separate the belligerents. Today, the Embassy of Canada is “ideally” located less than 200 metres from Tahrir Square and is therefore on the front lines of the revolution! The official residence is on Zamalek Island in the Nile. The house is fit for a queen, as Farida, the repudiated wife of King Farouk, lived there from 1948 to 1951. It is truly a Florentine architectural treasure.



The sprawling city of Cairo



An artist's rendering of the Embassy of Canada to Egypt