

Fascism in Interwar Egypt: Islam, Nationalism and Political Modernization

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PANOS KOURGIOTIS, JAN 28 2015

Although Fascism has been a phenomenon made in Europe, it had its own political and ideological implications on the neighboring colonized Arab-Muslim world as well during the interwar period. Considering Egypt's representative case, this article tends to show under which circumstances Fascism had established its own school in this Muslim country, what the native political forces had actually learned from it and how Fascism had been domestically translated into just another reflection of the political modernization process.

The Political System of Interwar Egypt and the Regional Context

While the new Italian Fascist administration was "rebuilding the "glorious Roman Empire" through Cyrenaica during 1922 – 1933 (Hamida, 1995: 119, 129, 131, 186), the British were studying new political formulas in order to retain their control over Egypt, after having granted their protectorate with a limited form of independence and a constitution in 1923 (Adelson, 1995: 197 – 227). That kind of "independence", of course, was specially adjusted to the British strategic interests, reflecting the balance of power between the imperial power, the nationalist Wafd party of the Egyptian urban class and Muhammad Ali's dynasty (Public Record Office, 1924: CAB/24/169). The British safeguarded their military presence in Cairo, Alexandria and the Suez Canal as a condition for authorizing the Palace and the Egyptian government to exercise more powers.

Due to the British institutional interventions, the function of the pre-1952 [1] Egyptian political system depended on the uneasy co-existence of these three pillars, i.e. the British, the Wafd party, and the Monarchy. As it is mentioned in diplomatic documents, the Egyptian governments were supposedly free to rule the country; however, the British High Commissioner had the power to overrule their policies whenever he considered them detrimental to the interests of the Empire. At the same time, the British needed some sort of counterweight to avoid the accumulation of power in the hands of the democratically elected governments (usually those of the Wafd party), which were easily falling prey to their own nationalist and populist agendas (Public Record Office, 1926: CAB/23/53, 1928: CAB/24/193, 1929: CAB/23/26).

According to them, the best way to achieve this was to grant the Palace [2] with constitutionally recognized, albeit excessive and disproportionate powers vis a vis those of the government (Vatikiotis, 1976: 271). Despite his autocratic outlook, the king was serving British policies but in exchange for his services he was left to believe that he is the sole ruler of the country, ignoring the governments and many times threatening the balance of power inside the Egyptian political system (Mutawali, 1980: 127). For this reason, the relations between the Monarchy and the *Wafd* party had been always intoxicated by mutual distrust and animosity during the whole period under question.

In any case, Britain's top priority in Egypt was not the establishment of a functional parliamentary democracy or a constitutional monarchy, but the uninterrupted control of the vital for the imperial communications Suez Canal, at any cost. Irrespectively of its dysfunctions, the Egyptian independence status and the domestic share of power that stemmed from it had to be in tune with the protection of this strategic interest. As a result, Great Britain signed a new Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1936 in order to strengthen its ties with both the king and the Wafd, along with keeping in mind Mussolini's expansionist policies in Libya and Eastern Africa (Williams, 2006: 124, Documents on British

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Foreign Policy, 1975: 59). Just before the outbreak of the Second World War indeed, Egypt had been put on a state of alert, surrounded by the Italian fascist presence almost everywhere, while the combined forces of Fascism and Nazism proved to be a serious military threat due to Erwin Rommel's [3] offensive two years later.

However, the fascist threat was not only of a military nature but of a domestic and political one as well. Fascism's appeal to some segments of the Egyptian society was real and must be viewed in the light of general educational, political and socio-economic transformations of that period. Furthermore, Fascism's appeal in a country like Egypt should be understood as a by-product or an impact of the modern, capitalist world of the colonies. That was a serious development, given that the metropolitan world had just gone through a dangerous depression and was entering into a new phase of darkness and political extremism.

Marching Towards Fascism?

A number of factors contributed into the spread of a fascist type of rhetoric and activism in the Egyptian political life.

First of all, there was the impact of the Great Depression of 1929 on the agricultural base of the Egyptian economy, which had led to the collapse of the international price of cotton (Mutawali, 1974: 140-141) [4]. The emergence of many conservative, ultranationalist and xenophobic organizations in the same period had been inextricably linked to the crisis of the land-based Egyptian capitalism. During depression, the recently founded Muslim Brotherhood had been expanding its influence in the villages and the provincial towns in the Delta of Nile, preaching to the *fellahin* [5] and the landlords alike the principles of a moral "Islamic Economy" (Hobsbawm, 2010: 143), while in 1933 the fascist "Young Egypt" was founded, which had been fiercely demanding the country's industrialization. Both organizations talked in their programs about the complete egyptianization of the economy with the participation of the pashas and the native industrialists in the textile sector, profoundly inspired by the national capitalism of the fascist economic model.

Another factor had been the nature of the domestic political struggle. In the context of the Wafd – Palace rivalry, the entrance of new extremist forces from the margins of the "official", partisan life into the political arena had been facilitated. These new non-parliamentary forces were supported by the educated middle and lower strata of the Egyptian urban class and they were incorporated in the political life due to the violent transformations of the political struggles and their diffusion everywhere: in the streets, schools, universities, mosques and factories.

The Egyptian political life of the interwar period in fact, had been shaped to a large extent by the king's attempts to expand his political reserves against Wafd (Juma'a, 2003: 267). While the party of the big land owners was directly patronizing most of the *fellahin* and the workers and could easily mobilize the students, the Palace was playing the card of anti-British nationalism and that of Islam (Beinin & Lockman, 1987: 159). Especially after having signed the new Anglo-Egyptian treaty in 1936, the Wafdist government became an easy target for the young king's Faruq propaganda and the religious establishment of the Azhar University with its students and the *Ulama* [6] proved to be a useful ally for the Monarchy (Radopoulos, 1930: 218). That was obvious in 1937 when the Azharites forced the Wafdist government to step down and in 1942 when the king was praised as a "martyr" for his supposedly heroic stance against the British. The British, of course, knew that the young monarch was following that policy only in terms of counterbalancing Wafd's popularity; however, they were concerned about the fact that one of their best allies was behind every anti-Zionist and anti-British organization in the country (Nasser, 1994: 58).

During the second half of the 1930's there were favorable conditions of an ideological mixture of Islam, the king's supremacy, and the fascist notion of the political-economic resurrection of the nation. The Muslim Brotherhood for instance, which enjoyed the support of 1/3 of the students in both Cairo and Alexandria after 1936 (Szyliowicz, 1973: 190), proposed its "Islamic System of Governance" instead of the morally and socially "corrupted", British inspired partyism (Banna, 1983: 146, 243), while the fascist *Young Egypt*, which was also gaining ground in universities by adopting a violent rhetoric against the old political elites and their parties, was in favor of an "illuminated dictatorship" modeled after that of Mussolini [7]. In demonstrations its members were shouting the slogan: "Islam, Fatherland, and King" (Salem, 1996: 660).

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A third factor that helped the spread of Fascism in Egypt had to do with foreign communities of the big urban centers. In 1917 among a general population of 12.750.918, 24.354 were British, 21.270 French, 40.198 Italian, 56.731 Greeks and about 60.000 Jews holding various nationalities (Kedourie, 1976: 48). Twenty years later, in 1937, and although their numbers had decreased, the 48% of the foreigners was concentrated in Alexandria and the 32% in Cairo, preserving their active and organized national communities (Suleiman, 1996: 80). As it is suggested, their presence affected the Egyptian fascist encounters on two levels:

Instead of being merely anti-colonialist, i.e. anti-british, the interwar Egyptian national movement developed a xenophobic and sometimes anti-Semitic character. In 1937, despite the Montreux resolutions for its gradual abolition, the unjust system of the Capitulations [8] with all its discriminatory provisions in favor of non-Egyptians was still causing the resentment of the young, educated middle class Egyptians; these were traditionally excluded from many sectors of the economy, suffering from underemployment now wanted their share (Issawi, 1946: 151). Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that *Young Egypt's* leading group consisted of four lawyers, three jobless graduate students, a merchant and a graduate from Azhar University (Jankowski, 1975: 27). The derailment of this radicalized, educated youth in the direction of anti-Semitism and xenophobia during the anti-British demonstrations of that period, as it was the case in the 1936-39 Palestinian Revolt (Public Record Office, 1936: CAB/24/261) was somehow inevitable, given the socio-economic conditions. Without being responsible for Great Britain's policies in the Middle East both the Jews and the other foreigners in Egypt had always been the convenient scapegoats in periods of nationalist turmoil (El-Awaisi, 1998: 176-177).

The 'Shirts' and the 'Brotherhood': Youth Activism and Organization

However foreign communities were not only the targets of the Egyptian political activists but their teachers as well and that has been especially true regarding fascist youth organization and political practices. The most representative case was that of the Italian community whose schools and institutes served as Fascism's gate to Egypt (Said, 1976: 107). *Young Egypt* and the *Wafd* had been the best students of the Italians, adopting paramilitary youth organizations totally inspired by the "Black Shirts" of Europe (Colombe, 1952: 106). On the one hand, there were *Young Egypt's* "Green Shirts" with their banners and military parades, giving fascist salutes and praising the king, who had been admirers of Italy as well, despite their official alliance with Great Britain. Throughout 1936 – 1938 the "Green Shirts" had become the most effective weapon in the anti-*Wafd* campaign and in 1937 they even attempted to murder the Wafdist prime minister. On the other hand, the *Wafd* had developed its own praetorian unit the "Blue Shirts", which had been used in order to terrorize the opponents of the party, attacking the deputies of the monarchist parties in their cars (Haikal, 1951: 352). The British described them as "gangs of thugs armed with sticks and knives" (Public Record Office, 1936: CAB/24/259).

The Muslim Brotherhood, which had been somehow distant from the fight between the "Shirts", adopted a similar organization called the "*Jawalla*" (Lia, 1998: 101). From the very beginning the Brotherhood had been receptive to the model of the Christian missions and especially that of the Y.M.C.A., which had been active in the country. In the same fashion of borrowing modern organizational and indoctrination models, they created their own youth battalions, imitating boy scouts of the Greek communities, which had already been affected by Fascism after 1936 [9]. Like the "Shirts", the *Jawalla* had been strongly demonstrating their presence everywhere with parades. They were dressed in military uniforms, holding the Brotherhood's banners, and they had been allegedly receiving military training in camps (Halim, 1994: 161), but unlike the "Shirts" which had been officially banned altogether in 1939, the *Jawalla* survived even after the war, engaging in the provision of social services in the countryside.

All these youth paramilitary organizations represented the ultimate phase of the Egyptian fascist experiment.

Conclusion

In the end, Fascism failed to survive politically in Egypt, despite king Faruq's cordial relations with Italy, the anti-British Axis propaganda in the Arab world and, of course, the fact that a large proportion of the Egyptian populace believed that Rommel could liberate them from the tyranny of the colonialists. The mosques indeed cultivated that notion for some time. Although the king had been designated for stabilizing the political system and containing the

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popularity of the *Wafd*, his short-lived flirt with both domestic and Italian Fascists proved to be a source of irritation for his British allies, who in turn forced him by the power of guns and tanks to appoint a Wafdist government in February, 1942.

As a concluding remark, it could be claimed that despite its short exposure to European Fascism, the Egyptian urban class learned some of the tools it needed in order to forge a modern identity for the country, reconciling its Arab – Islamic legacy with the imported metropolitan models of political guidance. From this point of view, the Egyptian fascist experiment could be interpreted as just another reflection of the same process of political modernization that shocked many parts of the dependent, agrarian world. However, the school of Fascism taught Egyptian activists how to use its modern symbols and rituals in order to transform their internal political struggles, but it proved completely incompetent in terms of teaching them how to fight for national independence.

Notes

[1] On July 1952, the Free Officer's Movement conducted a revolutionary coup d'état, that abolished the monarchy of Egypt as well as the political parties of the previous era.

[2] The British admitted that they intervened in favor of the Monarchy from the beginning: *'We guaranteed the crown to Fuad Pasha and his son, Faruq, against popular will'*. Public Record Office. Memorandum. Secret. Dec. 30, 1924. 2, CAB/24/169

[3] Erwin Rommel, known as the Desert Fox was a German field marshal of World War II.

[4] During 1930 – 31 the price of cotton dropped to 50%.

[5] Landless agricultural workers or small land tenants.

[6] The religious scholars of the Sunni Muslim countries.

[7] The Muslim Brotherhood talked in its press about a love affair between Young Egypt and the Italian Fascists. *Majalla al Khulud*, Brotherhood's weekly magazine, 13 January 1939, vol. 5, p. 9.

[8] The Capitulations had been implemented since the 16th century by the Ottoman Empire providing favorable conditions for trade and privileges to its European residents. Egypt retained this system until the 1940's.

[9] Greece had a fascist type dictatorship under Ioannis Metaxas during 1936 – 1940.

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