

The Long Shadow of the 1952 Revolution

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Almost exactly fifty-nine years ago, on January 26, 1952, downtown Cairo was in flames. Cinemas, department stores, and hotels were set alight by rioters in the streets. The identity of these rioters would become the focus of enormous speculation: Were they revolutionaries who sought the expulsion of British colonial rule from Egypt, or rather, were they counterrevolutionary forces who were giving the then-Egyptian regime or the army a pretext to intervene? Whatever the case, within a matter of six months, that regime – which the vast majority of Egyptians saw as corrupt, unrepresentative, and brutal in its repression of peaceful protest – was overthrown by a cadre of young military men known as the “Free Officers,” led by the charismatic Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser.



[Cover from Ruz al-Yusuf magazine on the 1952 Revolution. From the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's "Memory of Modern Egypt" online archive.]

Historians have often looked back at the “day Cairo burned” in January 1952, and wondered whether it was a turning point in Egypt’s struggle for independence from the British occupation, and from an Egyptian government dominated by landowning and professional elites who made a mockery of democracy. They have wondered whether the “day Cairo burned” ruined the chance for a civilian-led popular uprising to uproot the status quo in Egypt, and whether that day rendered the “Free Officers” the only force in the country capable of eliminating the existing regime. And they have wondered, often with a great deal of nostalgia, about “what might have been” – about whether a civilian movement would have ultimately succeeded in wresting control of the country from the British and their Egyptian collaborators.

While the situation Egypt faces today is starkly different from that which the country faced in 1952, I cannot escape eerie reminders of the “day Cairo burned” and its aftermath in the scenes I have witnessed on Cairo’s streets in the past several weeks. On February 2, when the Mubarak regime sent thugs into the streets to break the bones and the spirit of the pro-democracy protesters in Tahrir Square, I could not but recall how the British and their Egyptian collaborators used the threat of chaos and disorder as a rallying cry for the forces of counterrevolution in 1952. Perhaps more importantly, I could not but recall how the “Free Officers” would ultimately position themselves, in the July 1952 Revolution that would return “Egypt to the Egyptians,” as Egypt’s “saviors” from this chaos and disorder.

Nasser’s appeal to Egyptians at the time was an eminently sensible one – that after so many years of suffering under the colonial yoke, during which the British and their Egyptian collaborators had systematically plundered the country of its enormous wealth, Egypt could not afford the instability a democratic system of government would spawn. Egypt’s experiment with democracy between the world wars had proved not only a failure in serving the vast majority of Egyptians and their economic and social needs, but an utter sham at the political level as well. What Egypt needed in 1952, according to Nasser, was not democracy but development, a scientific effort to carry Egypt into the modern world, with all the accoutrements of education and industrialization that this entailed.

I think it has become quite clear over the past sixty years that this was a historic mistake, for which at least three generations of Egyptians have paid an enormous price. But my purpose here is not to condemn Nasser or to litigate the case against the military regime he and his successors built. There will be plenty of occasions for historians to consider these important matters as we rewrite the Egyptian past in light of the history-making events transpiring in Egypt today.

My purpose, rather, is to caution those who seek comfort in military guarantees of "stability" against compromise with the army at this critical moment. Egyptians now have an historic opportunity before them – to dislodge, at long last, the military from their politics. To allow the military to continue to govern the Egyptian people, as it has since the 1952 Revolution against British rule, would be to commit the unpardonable sin of repeating a cardinal error of the past. It is time to return the proprietorship of the Egyptian government to its people. It is time to let hope, rather than fear, rule the day. Only then will we lay to rest that specter of Cairo burning, the specter that has haunted Egypt through so much of its modern history.

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