

THE CENTRAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM OF THE UAR

Part I: The Rural Element

by Alan W. Horton

Cairo
April 1962

At the time of Egypt's merger with Syria and the proclamation of a United Arab Republic in February 1958, the moderate enthusiasm shown in Egypt did not dull the cutting edge of that tool of political satire, the urban Egyptian joke. Much biting humor was directed at the name chosen for the new political entity. The United Arab Republic, it was said, was neither united nor Arab nor a republic.

The humor caricatured the actualities of two situations. The first was the dream of a unified Arab state that would, with dignity and magnanimity, play a leading role among the nations. The second was the social and political situation within Egypt itself. It is a fair surmise that the wit appealed to the leadership of the United Arab Republic, since that leadership was largely Egyptian. (President Nasser himself was once reputed to have one of the better collections of jokes about his regime.) And since these men combined hardheadedness with vision, they certainly reflected soberly on the reconciliation of present practicalities to an image of the future.

And now the humor has lost one of its targets. The cause of Arab unity has received a disturbing setback. A Syrian "separatist movement," as it is called by the Cairo press, has successfully carried through a plot to break away from "the Arab nation." But the idea of Arab unity lives on—as usual. Even the Syrian separatists, perhaps especially the Syrian separatists, must pay it lip service. And, though it now should have only one star in its flag, there is a continuing United Arab Republic. On February 22, in fact, the continuing Republic celebrated UAR Day in solemn memory and promise; on February 23 the Cairo press noted, not without satisfaction, that the previous day had witnessed demonstrations and disturbances throughout Syria.

Despite the continuing ideal, the attention of the Egyptian government has inevitably turned toward the problems concerning its own part of the Nile Valley. One feels the greater attention at almost every point. This does not mean that the concept of a larger United Arab Republic, or an even larger Arab unity, is not woven into the fabric of political justification, but it does imply a renewed determination to demonstrate within a single geographical area that the best road to Arab progress is that chosen by the Egyptian Revolution. Though clearly associated with the success of the separatist movement, the sharper focus on purely local problems constitutes in essence a return to a basic concern of the Revolution, namely, the making of a modern Egypt.

The Central Problem

Among educated Egyptians there is general agreement on the larger outlines of the central problem: how does one create a modern nation out of a political entity that in its present form cannot seriously compete with mass-supported industrialized nations of the outside world. The need for a new society, an infrastructure to support political and economic development, is keenly felt and often expressed not only by the ruling group but also by those who, though they may for various reasons disapprove of the present regime, are intelligently concerned about the country's future.

In social and political terms the problem involves no less than the sociological restructuring of an entire nation and the establishment of stable political institutions based on mass loyalty. The immensity of the involvement will be readily appreciated by any behavioral scientist—rapid and planned change of every facet of society ranging from the basic family unit to the highest levels of the national bureaucracy. Fundamentally, perhaps, the problem is one of the making of a modern Egyptian mind, the indoctrination of diverse groups and classes into a far less stratified whole that is willing to sacrifice, and possibly die, to make the watan (the nation, Egypt) great. This is clearly no routine reform—and the difficulty is compounded many times over by the necessity of reaching outside the tradition for the models of what a modern mind should be. Though there is complete justification for protesting that the modern Egyptian mind will be sui generis, planners of great change in the UAR can draw little on the traditions of their own culture and must inevitably look to the methods and techniques of those countries with which they wish to compete more successfully. To graft something akin to the Central European mind, which has been developing separately for many centuries, onto the mentality of Nile

Valley peasantry and urban poor should constitute a project of many lifetimes; but in the UAR there is among the educated an understandable sense of urgency based on the grim pressures of population and the powerful attractions of international respect.

While there exists among the politically sophisticated a remarkable measure of agreement on the speedy necessity for a new and industrial society and a new mentality, there exists also considerable disagreement as regards the definition of that new society and the means of achieving it. But, though it may be interesting, and perhaps crucial in terms of the ultimate importance of mass support, to speculate on the reasons for the disagreement of many intellectuals and other key arbiters of public opinion, the matter of most immediate concern to most educated Egyptians is the possession of a working knowledge of the definitions and means conceived and practiced by the ruling army elite.

The government seems increasingly convinced that the image of the domestic future must be seen in democratic, socialist, co-operative terms. When this phrase was first employed in late 1957 by President Nasser, it was little noticed. But it is a phrase that has received increasing definition over the years and that will, moreover, be receiving further definition as new ideas, or appropriate times for revelation, arrive. The word democratic, which not long ago stood for a vague allegiance to constitutionalism and equality before the law, has in recent months taken on the additional meaning of economic justice; it has been explained that, with the end of the political struggle against imperialism (that of the West generally, Britain and France particularly), the end of the revolutionary stage during which unity was vitally necessary, it is now possible to risk internal divisions (i.e., the resentment of "reactionaries") and to enter the next stage, that of reducing the gap between rich and poor. As a first step in pursuit of economic justice some of the rich were "isolated" in November and December of 1961; their property as well as some of their income, both of which could be used against "the people," are now at the disposal of a government sequestrator. The word socialist received abrupt clarification in July 1961, when there was announced a series of socialist laws that in various ways brought most middle- and large-scale nonagricultural enterprise into the public sector and that reduced from 200 to 100 feddans (approximately 100 acres) the amount of land that an individual could own. The implications of the word co-operative remain less clear: though agricultural co-operatives have been fostered by the Revolution and now perform important services, other small attempts, such as co-operative stores, seem to have had little more than

doctrinaire value. Current government thinking appears to be that co-operatives are essentially agencies of the state and provide a method of controlling prices for the benefit of the public. An application of this thinking to the thousands of small enterprises involved in distribution to the consumer would not come as a total surprise.

In short, the government envisages an industrial society in which economic, and therefore social, justice is assured. Stated this way, the image is one that would receive a large measure of support from the educated. But the government also envisages itself at both core and periphery of a socialist state; it does not foresee a time when the enforcement of economic and social justice will not be necessary, and it cannot imagine the industrial development necessary to the viability of the economy without its own disinterested direction. It is now gathering in the political and economic powers that have hitherto escaped direct administrative control—and it is at this point of increased and more effective centralization of authority, whether seen as socialist or purely political in inspiration, that the government needs most urgently to explain itself and to achieve a broader base of support among those whose thinking power and literary skill are now only potential assets.

One of the regime's embarrassments of recent years has been the absence of effective intellectual apology. There has, for example, been no recent book by an Egyptian author that undertakes to defend behind satisfactorily rationalized ramparts the principles and goals of the Revolution and the means necessary to the achievement of those goals. The fact that no such scholarly defense has been written may be attributable to the piecemeal fashion in which increasingly sharper definitions of ends and means have been revealed—and yet the main goals as well as some clear indications of means were available in the Preamble of the Constitution that was introduced to the public in January 1956. Or it may be that there is a hesitancy about committing oneself in print before being certain that the critique inherent in a proper defense will be welcomed by the authorities—and yet a considerable body of evidence points to the fact that the regime would now condone a critique by one whose heart is clearly in the ideologically right place. Or it may be that those with the proper scholarly equipment for the job are uncertain that the socialist directions taken by the Revolution will continue—and yet one finishes a reading of modern Egyptian history in the conviction that a defense of the present regime could not long be outmoded by another regime. The problems are too pressing, the possible solutions too few, and the expectations have become too great; no matter what they are called, the goals of any other

government would have to involve inter alia an industrial society, a higher standard of living for the poor relative to the rich, a less stratified and less segmented social structure (the "social solidarity" mentioned in the Constitution of 1956), and the enforcement of economic and social justice—and all this to be attempted by means of an increasing centralization of authority because the speed at which national wealth (in the broadest sense) must be increased gives time for the development of too few indigenous extragovernmental forces capable of planning and executing parts of the total task.

There is another reason why an effective apologia may not have appeared. Those who might do the job are often too busy even to contemplate it. The truly capable are in great demand and are asked to fill a variety of part-time teaching, administrative, and advisory positions in addition to serving on delegations to international and Arab conferences. And, like the less capable, they are anxious to do so in order to supplement basic incomes that do not meet the standard of living that their international experience leads them to expect. The government has taken only the most tentative steps in the direction of subsidy of research and writing and would in any case tend to give priority to action over reflection, to planning over assessment, to short-term solution over long-term analysis, and to piecemeal installation of new ideas over ideological maintenance.

These priorities, though eminently understandable, are unfortunate because it is only by way of research and writing, analysis and effective apologia, that the nation's professional talent can be enthusiastically regimented in the pursuit of clearly understood goals by clearly justified means. The regimentation of this talent is a necessary first step in the development of the stable and broadly-based institutions on which the new Egypt must ultimately depend. And there is, or so it appears to the writer, an effective defense to be made. One starts with the central social and political problem, that of creating a modern nation by developing a mass of modern national minds that can understandingly contemplate sacrifice for Egypt's sake.

The Rural Component

The divisions within Egypt are such that one sometimes hesitates to allude to Egyptian society in the singular. Should one not speak of Egyptian societies? The landed aristocracy, the urban poor, the peasantry, the ethnic and the religious minorities—these and others appear to have a pronounced measure of social autonomy. Granted that

every social unity must contain a measure of social diversity, are the group and class loyalties of Egypt so pronounced that they preclude the idea of sacrifice for the watan? An obvious and extreme instance is worth noting.

The classical divisions of Arab society are those of townsmen, peasants, and nomads. Though nomads exist in the deserts to the east and west of the Nile Valley, their small numbers permit reference to a fundamental urban-rural duality in Egyptian life. Some observers have seen this duality as two separate and distinct cultures united only by an economic system that is directed and controlled by townsmen. Others have seen the duality in terms of an ingeniously meshed class system that includes an easily identifiable rural component. Whatever the sociological view, a crucial question for the present regime is whether or not there exists a basis for a common and country-wide loyalty to the idea of an Egyptian nation—and especially whether or not there exists such a basis among the peasantry.

The peasantry is considered by many to be the most conservative element of Egyptian life. This is probably true. Egyptian peasants have, for example, been described as follows:

The character of their minds is every way correspondent to the hardness of their bodies. The implacability displayed by these peasants in their hatreds, and their revenges; their obstinacy in the battles which frequently happen between different villages; their sense of honor in suffering the bastinado, without discovering a secret, and even the barbarity with which they punish the slightest deviation from chastity in their wives and daughters, all prove that their minds, when swayed by certain prejudices, are capable of great energy and that that energy only wants a proper direction, to become a formidable courage.

The description is that of Volney, the French traveler whose last trip to Egypt was in 1785. But it is a description that might have been written yesterday by an anthropologist who was not on the alert for signs of change. To be sure, many aspects of rural life have undergone considerable evolution—there are now roads, rural buses, radios, even occasional television sets—but the preoccupation with local concerns, the supreme distraction of village passions and events remain strikingly similar. In late 1961, to cite dramatically from a multitude of examples, a number of bullet-pierced or gashed bodies floated down to the

Assiut barrage within a space of 24 hours, the result of a sudden surge of intervillage hatred; the bodies spoke mutely of a traditional kind of sacrifice that villagers are willing to make. In this instance some villagers clearly considered the honor of family, kin group, or village to be a vital matter, one in which death was willingly risked for the sake of loyalty to a local group. It is a fair generalization that such local "patriotism" is usual throughout Egypt.

Can the local loyalties of the peasantry be enlarged to include the nation? Certainly the older tradition is one of exclusive absorption in village affairs, but there are scattered indications of change. By inference the advent of road, radio, rural bus, and other new channels of communication is a harbinger of a new mentality, of new interests, and of new loyalties. The inference receives partial support from Jacques Berque's comments¹ about change in a Delta village which, though in some respects untypical in that it has been included in the activities of a UNESCO village project, displays clear-cut tendencies in two directions. The first is toward a breakdown of loyalty to the extended family and a lessening of authority of the head of household; the second is toward a spread of interest in urban techniques, urban education, urban politics, and urban life generally. Despite the paucity of other recently published material² it is a fair surmise that the same tendencies would now be observable elsewhere because, crucially and increasingly, the government is beginning to interfere directly in village affairs.

Under the previous regime the principal governmental contact with village life was political rather than ministerial or bureaucratic. The political parties, particularly the Wafd, kept in touch by way of party organizations (including locally powerful members of the landlord class) with village headmen ('omdas), who could be expected to

¹ In Histoire Sociale d'un Village Égyptien au XXeme Siècle, Paris, 1957.

² The book by H. Ammar, Growing Up in an Egyptian Village (London, 1954), is based on research done before the Revolution in the Gafari tribal villages of Upper Egypt (Aswan Province). The tempo of change described by Ammar should be compared with that of a "well-to-do" village family of tribal origin near Cairo described by I. Lichtenstadter ("An Arab-Egyptian Family," Middle East Journal, 1952, pp. 379-399). A village study in the Delta (Daqahliya Province) is now being carried out by Dr. Lucy Wood of the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo under contract to the Ministry of Agrarian Reform. Another study in Upper Egypt (Beni Suef Province) is also under way under the same auspices.

swing a substantial proportion of village votes, or in some cases with the leaders of village oppositions—each, both 'omda and opposition leader, heading an alliance of extended families that was concerned fundamentally with its social honor vis-à-vis the "village enemy" rather than with national politics. Political contact with the urban world was thus by way of a small handful of village notables, who used the opportunities offered by urban politicians as weapons, in the all-important struggle against each other.

The bureaucracy of the central and provincial government touched village life in much the same way. Government functionaries tended to deal only with the 'omda—and these functionaries were few, too often far from the villages for which they had responsibilities, and too often discharging those responsibilities from a town desk. The roster of bureaucratic contact was seldom more than a man from the Ministry of Agriculture (irrigation), a man from the Ministry of Finance (taxes), and a few police representing the remote urban law of a provincial center. Only in the last years of the previous regime was there significant ministerial concern with the interior workings of village life—chiefly, some pioneering work effected by the Ministry of Social Affairs (Department of the Fellah) and by the Ministry of Education.

Attempts by the present regime to improve and reorganize village life are perhaps most significant in terms of the channels for urban influence they have created. This is not only because the plans for change have produced relatively little change as planned but also because national unity must ultimately be based on urban ideas about what constitutes national loyalty. Though a tradition of government (i.e., urban) regulation of rural areas has existed for centuries, channels for the intrusion of urban culture itself into village life, heralds of the spread of urban standards and concepts, represent new bureaucratic departures.

Building on the efforts of the previous regime, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education have vastly extended their village coverage. In combination with some other ministries they have also assisted in the establishment of Combined Centers (wahdat mu-gamma'a), which as of 1960 provided social, educational, medical, health, agricultural, and recreational services to some 250 small groups of villages throughout Egypt.³ A Ministry of Local Government has, more recently, been created for the purpose of co-ordinating the efforts of all ministries in the outlying areas. This new ministry is, significantly, under the leadership of one of the vice-presidents of the UAR, Kemal El-din Husain, who is also at the head of the National Union.

The National Union, established in 1957, is a "nonparty" organization to rally the masses and bring them to an understanding of the principles of the Revolution. It organizes but does not contest elections; it wishes to become the core of a popular enthusiasm but, in fact, replaces the previous regime's landlord-controlled political parties (which have of course been abolished) in the sense that it is available as a focus for specialized political sentiment. One of its major efforts has been toward the creation of local chapters in villages for the purpose of encouraging greater local responsibility in the task of achieving the goals of the Revolution—and possibly for the purpose of discouraging the problematic peasant emigration to the cities. Though the degree of the National Union's success in supplanting or supplementing traditional village institutions and providing a new and nationally oriented rallying point has so far been minimal (and this may be one of the reasons why its structure and operation are now being carefully reviewed), it has succeeded in many instances in reaching considerably below the level of headman and opposition leader. One reason for this smaller success may well be the increasing tendency to assign to the local and provincial levels of the National Union the job of screening candidates for local and national membership in the councils of "guided democracy" and for appointment to local positions in the bureaucracy.

All these government activities and many others have created not only channels for urban influence but also a situation from which increased rural expectation and demand could ultimately foster a village consciousness of nation. From being nation-conscious it is only a step to developing a national loyalty, a feeling for what the nation ought to do. But the development of national consciousness is an enormous job, seemingly a project of decades rather than years, and it will be a long time before the usual villager can be persuaded by present means to risk death for his country as he risks it for his kingroup. Though one can see signs of its inevitable arrival, the moment of finding among the peasant mass a basis for national loyalty and sacrifice has not yet come.

* * * * *

³ One reason that more Combined Centers have not been built is the difficulty of staffing them. Qualified professional people are reluctant to leave urban centers to live in a cultural milieu that is, or has become alien. There has recently been enacted a law that requires the professionally trained upon graduation to spend two years of governmentally assigned internships outside the big cities. The writer does not know how this well-perceived law is working out.

A member of the landlord class said the other day: "If we're going to have a revolution, I wish we'd get it over with." He was complaining of the long and dreary process of nibbling away at the old order and was, seemingly, advocating the sudden abolition of that order by fiat and purge. The Egyptian Revolution is no mere coup d'état—it will ultimately have a revolutionary impact on the social organization of Egypt—but its pace is indeed slow when compared to similarly far-reaching events in France and Russia.

Is the pace of rural revolution too slow? Though this clearly is not the kind of question that can be answered glibly, the fact that the population will probably double itself in 20 years suggests an affirmative answer. But what kind of government activity is it that will be most effective in developing a new peasant mentality? Further land reform, for example, would have little impact on village life and thought. Present land laws have met for the moment the psychological needs of the have-nots and have broken the economic power of the landlord class; new and more stringent laws would not change peasant patterns of local loyalty. Compulsory military service, on the other hand, is probably a step in the right direction. Since 1955 it has been impossible to avoid military service by payment of an exemption fee. Young peasants by the thousands have left the confines of exclusive local concern and have been thrown with townsmen into a situation of cultural interchange, absorption, and indoctrination. It is this kind of regimentation that may increasingly appeal to the regime as a quicker and more effective method of integrating the peasantry into an Egyptian national life.

*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Frank Horton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.