THE CENTRAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM OF THE UAR

Part II: The Urban Mosaic

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In its psychological aspects the central social and political problem of the United Arab Republic has to do with the making of a mass of modern minds capable of national loyalty and national sacrifice; in its sociological aspects the problem has to do with the development of political institutions that can draw together the various components of Egyptian society and organize the great leap into industrialization— and other outward manifestations of national success. As outlined previously (in Part I of this Report), the problem is enormous and its implications for the Egyptian rural mass are staggering.

Despite clear indications of great change to come, there does not yet exist among the peasantry a psychological or sociological substructure firm enough to sustain the idea of loyalty to a nation. Loyalties remain fundamentally local and are held by kin group or village; contacts with the world outside are used chiefly as weapons in the never-ending and supremely important struggle with local rivals. But the foundations of a rural revolution are being laid by a government that has shown increasing interest in interfering with the internal workings of village life.

The basic directions of that rural revolution are worth noting— for their urban as well as their rural implications. Of the two major cultural segments of Egyptian society it is the urban segment that is culturally dominant and that in a small way has been able, by way of new communications channels, to diffuse to rural areas its concepts of what is right and proper. And it is the government, the principal instrument of urban leadership, that is creating those new channels. Prior to the Revolution the governments of Egypt were not basically interested in communicating with the peasantry; the landlord class, to which the governments were socially responsible, maintained a system of largely

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economic contact that guaranteed continuance of the cultural gap. The
present regime, on the other hand, has no identifiable class affiliations[1]
and is understandably concerned about "social solidarity." This con-
cern has led to attempts to make the peasant nation-conscious and to
convert the townsman to positive nationalism.

The Urban Components

Though most townsmen are nation-conscious, there are many
who have not taken the further step that leads to national loyalty. By
this I do not mean that there is significant disloyalty to the nation or
even to the present regime; what I do mean is that an apathetic lack of
concern about what the nation ought to do prevents the development of
an effective and generalized spirit of national sacrifice. Many of the
educated Egyptians whom the Westerner ordinarily meets in Cairo are
indeed patriots — they have strong feelings either for or against present
policies — but the great bulk of city-dwelling Egyptians is seldom able
to focus on more than the immediate problems of money and living and
the pressing demands of kin and small community. Despite the apathy,
it is a reasonable prognosis that a basis for national loyalty will soon
exist in urban centers. What is occurring that such a prognosis is pos-
sible?

Though urban society is divided into a multitude of social classes,
ethnic groups, and religious sects, each town or city is integrated into
a smoothly functioning urban unit by what Carleton Coon has described
as a "mosaic system." Traditionally each group or class has its par-
ticular social and economic function. The landed gentry and big busi-
nessmen, the Copts, the Armenians, the bazaar merchants, the Italians,
the artisans organized into various guilds, the petty bureaucrats, the
Jews, the porters, the Greeks, the Nubians — all these and many others,
forming a myriad of overlapping and interlinked social categories, have
their places in the pattern of the mosaic. The fact that the business of
government, the function of paternalistic direction of rural and urban
poor, was in the hands of a landed upper class was perhaps basic to the

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[1] There would be some dispute on this point. There does exist,
mostly among Westerners, a myth concerning the "peasant" (or some-
times "lower middle-class") origins of the ruling army elite. It is
true that many of them are of varying humble origins — but it is also
true that many of them are not. By far the best and most balanced ac-
count about the origins of the Free Officers may be found in Vatikiotis,
P. J., The Egyptian Army in Politics (Bloomington, 1961), pp. 44-68.

mosaic's grand design; after ten revolutionary years, during which the
power of that class has been broken, the mosaic system itself is show-
ing signs of disintegration.

This does not mean, however, that the mosaic system is static
by nature and that it does not make provision for social change. Urban
society was evolving before the Revolution almost as rapidly as it is
now. Throughout the history of modern Egypt there has been steady
change as new ideas, new techniques, and new philosophies have created
the demand. One has only to skim through Lane's Manners and Customs
of the Modern Egyptians, that incomparable work of urban ethnography
written in the 1830's, to be aware of the headlong pace of change in Cairo
over the last 100 years or so. But it was all within the framework of a
system that encouraged not only rapid adaptation to the needs of the
times but also a nonnationalist cultural diversity.

In the early 19th century, for example, Muhammad Aly encour-
aged various European groups to come to Egypt and fill positions in the
expanding realm of commerce and industry. Later in the century, un-
der Ismail, Syrian writers and editors came to meet the needs of a so-
ciety undergoing a literary revival. With the arrival of the machine
age a group of Italian mechanics found their way to Egypt and joined
the colony of their countrymen who had for some years dominated the
building industry. The response to the need for better education was
to encourage French cultural imperialism and American mission schools.
Though the British occupation of 1882 was a matter of force, the ensuing
cultural and economic activity of the British community was not only
welcomed but also given its place in the same mosaic that had provided
for previous arrivals over many centuries.

The essence of the mosaic system of Egypt is that it has fos-
tered culturally disparate communities within each town or city. Some
communities, like those mentioned in the preceding paragraph, are of
traceable foreign origins and maintain their foreignness by supporting
their own community institutions; prior to the Revolution each religious
community (sometimes a combination, sometimes a division, of ethnic
communities) additionally reinforced cultural separatism by adminis-
tering its own laws of personal status —including a concept of marriage
that was largely endogamous. Other communities that are Arabic-
speaking maintain a less distinct cultural separatism based on commu-
nity preoccupation with particular trades, skills, or professions; here
the distinctions are of manner of speech rather than language, of dress
rather than religion, of occupation rather than traceable cultural origin.
Though they do not support such formal community institutions as schools,

hospitals, and religious organizations, they maintain themselves as co-hesive groups by institutionalized consultation and co-operation, by com-munity endogamy, and by community residence area.[2] In addition to these two generalized types of community, there are many others that cannot be so neatly categorized — groups of all shades and gradations, formed by economic circumstance and the movements of ideas and peo-ples, and discernible as functioning elements of the mosaic.

The community structure within each city and town is partially crosscut by and partially interwoven with a class structure that ranges from various subclasses of landed gentry to immigrant laborers from rural areas. Some communities, such as the Coptic Orthodox, range over the entire class structure and have the support of both aristocrats and unskilled manual workers. Other communities, like Syrian Chris-tians and Nubians, are confined largely to one class. The communities that fit most neatly into the class structure are of course those of the Sunni Muslim majority; landed gentry, merchants, shopkeepers, ef-fendiya (clerks and petty bureaucrats), artisans, and laborers are all recognized categories — and some claim to recognize other categories, such as "professional middle class," that are in fact unstable and less satisfactorily defined. Within each class, and particularly within the upper classes, there is, despite the maintenance and general approval of community endogamy, considerable social intercourse between the various communities represented; at the better social clubs, for exam-ple, upper-class Muslims mix easily with their counterparts of the Cop-tic, Syrian, Jewish, Armenian, and Greek communities.

In those communities that range in composition over several classes there has always been considerable social mobility. Tradition-ally the principal methods of social advancement were educational and commercial; the end in view was admission to the upper class. The pos-sibility of advancement was open even to some of the peasantry; more than a few famous personalities in modern pre-Revolutionary history, such as Saad Zaghlul and Ahmed Lutfi el-Sayyid, were of village ori-gins. Whereas the commercial road to social success seems generally to have taken more than a generation, the educational road, as in the case of Zaghlul and Lutfi el-Sayyid, held out the hope of more immedi-ate arrival. A good education (preferably but not necessarily abroad), a knowledge of foreign languages, and a marriage that did not preclude

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[2] Almost no research has been done in Egypt on this type of commu-nity. The writer knows little more than is stated here. Working hypoth-eses are, however, available in the work done by the French in Fez — summarized in Carleton Coon's Caravan (New York, 1951), pp. 232-259.

social acceptance were apparently good guarantees that an able young man might ultimately be admitted to a higher class as a member in good and loyal standing.

"Arabness"

There was earlier mentioned[3] Egyptian humor directed at the name of the UAR, implying that it was neither united nor Arab nor a republic. Any allusion to disunity can be easily demonstrated for the continuing Republic (let alone by a comparison with its former Northern Region!) by simple reference to the cultural dichotomy of village and urban center. Within each urban center another kind of cultural disunity can be demonstrated, a disunity based not on distinct ways of life within the Arab ethos but on non-Arab influences and intrusions — a partial explanation for that ridicule in jest of the supposed Arab character of the UAR.[4]

Egyptian "Arabness" can be viewed as the domestic counterpart of 'Uruba (Arabism), the political concept and catchword that regulates and explains so many of the relations between Arab states; it might, in a sense, be viewed as the pan-Arab counterpart of watania (local nationalism). It seeks to describe an ethnic unity that the older urban order did not possess. Though the older order had its patriots, it did not have ethnic solidarity; though it had many who could be moved to tears or action by the words Arab and Egyptian, it could not mobilize the political energies of entire cities. There were always classes and groups whose special social or economic interests compromised a united political effort. In its search for mass support the new regime has quite naturally sought to weaken the community loyalties of the urban mosaic and to encourage the Arabization of urban society.

The attack on the mosaic system has been on many fronts. The weapons of attack range from subtle, possibly unintended atmospheres, which suggest approval or disapproval of relations with certain categories of persons (often foreigners), to forthright laws that reveal clearly the premium placed on Arab attitudes. The major point of attack is of course the "foreignness" to which the mosaic system gives rise.

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[3] In The Central Social and Political Problem of the UAR, Part I: The Rural Element (AWH-2-'62), an AUFS publication.

[4] Another partial explanation is the not uncommon feeling that most Egyptians are of Nile Valley stock and hence are not Arabs — despite acquisition of the Arabic language.

There is, for example, the foreignness of the non-Arab[5] communities that have been settled and established in Egypt for generations. Because they have their own schools, hospitals, religious organizations, and clubs, they have persisted intact and immune to assimilation. It is fair to say that they consider their own cultural affiliations superior to those of the Arab. Many of the communities are, like the Greeks and Italians, attached for both legal and cultural purposes to embassies of their "home" countries; some others, like the European Jews, while maintaining community cohesion, have their foreign passports revalidated at whatever embassy each particular family has established a relationship; still others, like the Armenians, are for the most part Egyptian nationals whose Arabic, though it is better than that of other non-Arab communities, remains nevertheless a second language. Over the last few years it has become understood by all that the choice is one of assimilation[6] or departure—and the latter alternative is generally favored even though it may mean abandoning property that has resulted from generations of enterprise. The communities that have foreign passports dwindle daily; those without foreign passports are leaving more slowly as emigrants to Brazil, Canada, and Australia. In a very short time there will not be enough persons to support the schools, hospitals, clubs, and religious organizations that have held them together.

The reasons for departure are reasonably clear. Several categories of laws are eating away at the foundations of non-Arab communities and threatening the privileged livelihood on which community status and well-being are based. One category has to do with the many who do not have Egyptian nationality. It is, for example, required by law that 85% of the employees of most enterprises involving ten persons or more be UAR citizens and that 75% of total salaries be paid to UAR citizens. It is required that all agents representing foreign manufacturers be UAR citizens. It was required in early 1957 that all directors and shareholders of banks and insurance companies be UAR citizens—and this requirement has since been extended to other varieties of enterprise. The unwillingness to take Egyptian nationality in the face of these legal pressures is symptomatic of the weakness of the mosaic system and demonstrates clearly that many loyalties lie outside Egyptian territory.

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[5] It is not always easy to determine which communities are non-Arab. What of the Arabic-speaking Jews (Karajites)? What of the West Aswan Nubian colony (settled there since the early 1900's), whose young men and women now speak only Arabic?

[6] It should be noted that some are ineligible for assimilation in that they, or their parents, did not apply for Egyptian nationality before various cutoff dates that were established ex post facto.

Another category of laws is essentially economic and applies to both Egyptian and non-Egyptian enterprise—but in the case of many non-Egyptians it affects directly their reasons for continued residence in the UAR by whittling away at easy profits. In the last few years personal and corporate taxes have risen sharply. An individual with an income roughly equivalent to $6,000 will now pay some 18% to 20% in income, progressive, and defense taxes, whereas in 1955 he would probably have paid less than 9%. Corporate taxes are not only substantially higher but also more efficiently and honestly collected. A closely allied category of laws is that having to do with the nationalization of most large- and medium-scale enterprise, a haphazardly practiced government doctrine until July 1961, when President Nasser announced an almost total take-over.

Perhaps the most significant category of laws is that which threatens the cultural continuity of the non-Arab communities. These laws are primarily educational and impose on the primary and second-ary schools of each community a curricular scheme fashioned in the Ministry of Education. To the outside observer who is not struggling to maintain his cultural identity the required curriculum seems reason-able, but to the member of the settled foreign community it appears as a harbinger of death by ethnic attrition. Of the child who is presumably to live his life in an increasingly Arabic-speaking society it asks a good knowledge of written Arabic; it asks also a knowledge of Arab history, geography, and "civics." Whether or not the curriculum can develop loyalties to the Egyptian nation is for the moment a side issue as far as the non-Arab communities are concerned—what is important to them is that there is no longer sufficient school time to inculcate their own cultural values.[7]

There are many other less obvious kinds of foreignness fostered by the mosaic system. An interesting and revealing instance is the for-eignness that has been, wittingly or unwittingly, encouraged among the well-to-do by foreign schools culturally affiliated to Western Europe and the United States. There are, for example, persons of numerous ethnic origins drawn together by the bonds of a common French educa-

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[7] This concern can be illustrated by an addendum to a term paper written for the writer before the Revolution by an Armenian undergrad-uate at the American University at Cairo. After completing a good, properly objective discussion of his own community in Cairo he felt obliged to add that Armenians in the United States were in great peril because, according to information he had received, there were some who did not even speak the Armenian language.

tion. Many of these are Egyptians, both Muslim and Copt, who, though
they may be stalwart patriots, are bound to view things differently from
those for whom French is a poorly taught third language in a govern-
ment school—or, for that matter, from those whose education has been
in American institutions. Though they may be the first to revile France
for its politics, their conscious or unconscious admiration of French
culture is reflected in their conscious or unconscious desire to be ad-
mired by French friends. Admittedly the case of the French-speaking
schools and of the ambivalent half-loyalties they have created is the
most pronounced, but only in degree is it dissimilar to others.

Though the government recognizes the importance of foreign lan-
guages and encourages better language programs whenever a properly
supervised opportunity presents itself, it clearly does not encourage
the cultural linkages that can be instilled by a foreign primary and sec-
ondary education. Government control of such education has, since
1958, become most strict and will soon become even more so. Foreign
teachers will shortly be limited to the teaching of their own languages;
foreign-owned schools must shortly be Egyptian-owned; foreign princi-
pals and headmasters must shortly be replaced by UAR nationals. Within
a year or two many schools will be taken over and administered directly
by the Ministry of Education.

As to the cultural communities already created by foreign schools,
the regime is up against a trickier but more transient problem. It is
tricky because a great deal of the country's talent comes from these
backgrounds; it is transient because the problem will become less press-
ing as a new generation matures under greater educational supervision
—or so the theory goes. The present situation is, however, under effec-
tive control. It is not difficult, for example, to create an urban atmos-
phere that militates effectively against the advisability of friendships
with foreigners; a hint in a newspaper article, an instruction to certain
categories of government employees to avoid diplomats, a spy trial—
any of these can, when necessary, do the job. Nor is it difficult, should
a situation call for it, to make a particular group of foreigners feel un-
welcome.[8] Though these atmospheres and ploys can be explained in other
ways, the fact remains that they also fit an interpretation that sees a
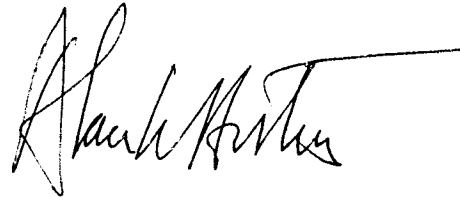
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[8] Clear illustrations of this and other methods of "control" were pro-
vided by the French spy trial, which was widely reported in the world
press this winter. The trial was called off "in the public interest," and
all prisoners released, after the Evian agreements and the visit to
Cairo of Muhammad Ben Bella—but long after the recall from Egypt
of most lycée teachers of French nationality!

government attempt to keep admirers of foreign civilizations away from sources of cultural renewal.

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The campaign against various kinds and degrees of foreignness can only be understood, and justified, in terms of the central social and political problem. The making of a modern nation demands a homogeneity of effort that the older urban order is not prepared to make. But here, as opposed to the dichotomous situation of distinct rural and urban cultures, one can see through the obstructions that lie ahead to a time when the urban-educated will constitute, as one nationalist put it, "a solid core of patriots dedicated to national development." Those who cannot assimilate and adjust to a new national atmosphere will depart or will be encouraged to drift into uninfluential eddies out of the main currents of national endeavor—and, hopefully, from these eddies there will come a younger generation that will fail to respond to the subtle semiloyalties of the urban mosaic and will be prepared to sacrifice for Egypt.