

THE CENTRAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM OF THE UAR

Part III: The Search for Popular Support

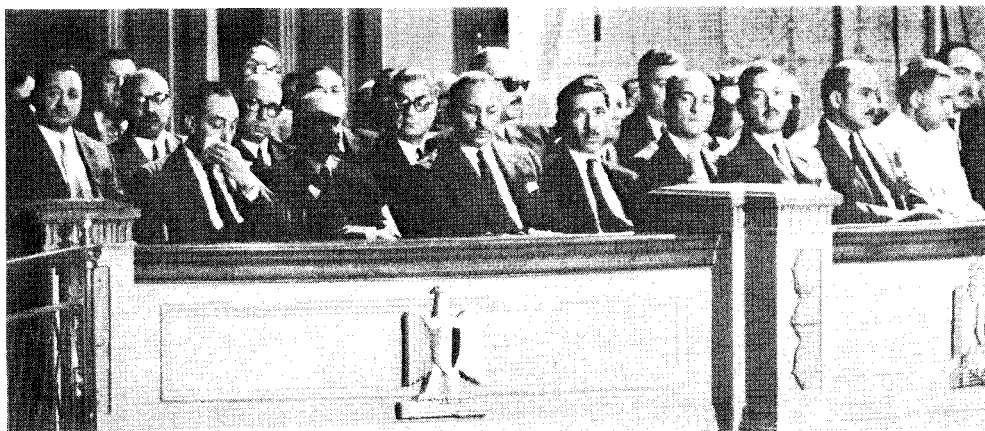
by Alan W. Horton

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Just before 6:00 p.m. on May 21, 1962, President Nasser strode onto the stage of the big auditorium of Cairo University and, after a Koranic chant and a brief introduction, began a six-hour reading of the new Charter for National Action. The occasion was the opening session of the National Congress of Popular Powers, a kind of constituent assembly designed to represent the various sectors of Egyptian society and called to approve not only the Charter but also the methods of formation of a new and permanent popular political institution.

The auditorium had an air that was studiously solemn and hopefully historic. The decor consisted principally of red velvet overdrapes and gray curtains in tasteful and utilitarian display; a small shield of the Republic on the velvet above the stage and another gracefully executed shield commemorating both Congress and Charter were the only man-made symbols of the nation. To the President's left, on a balconied wing of the stage, sat the entire cabinet in order of seniority.¹ The other wing was occupied by surprisingly well-behaved photographers and the main battery of television cameras and lights. The 1,750 members of the Congress filled the auditorium's main floor; diplomats and other dignitaries were seated round the periphery in slightly raised plush boxes. One side section of the large first balcony was reserved for journalists (simultaneous translation facilities were provided for

¹ There were, however, two noncabinet persons in the front row. Vice-presidents (Baghdadi, Amer, Mohyiddin, and Shafei) took the first four of the six chairs, but the remaining two were occupied by Hasan Ibrahim, an original Revolution Command Council member who is (once again) Director of the Economic Development Organization, and by Abdel-Hamid Sarraj, the former chief of security for the Northern Region of the UAR and recent escapee from a Syrian prison.



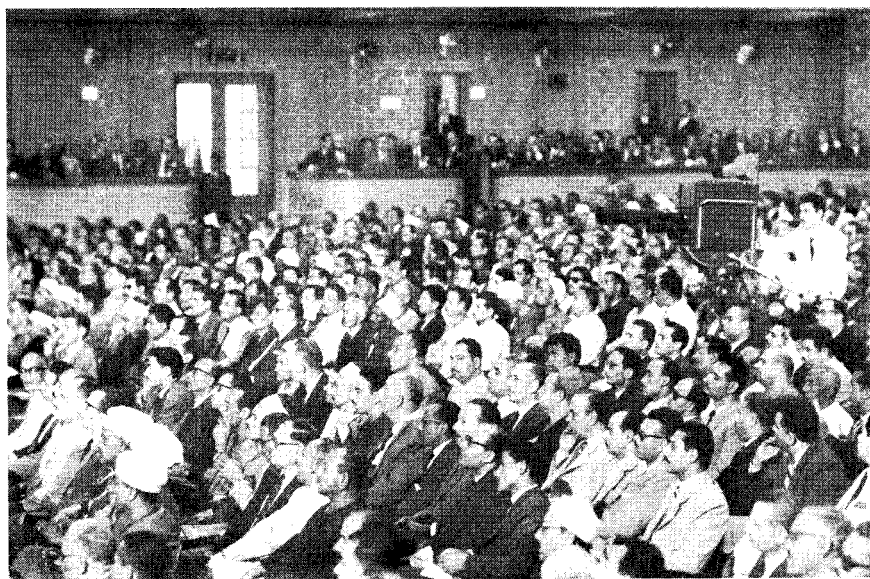
Vice-presidents and the rest of the cabinet.

President Nasser
reading the Charter
for National Action.



Members and guests.

The
opening
session
of the
Congress
of
Popular Powers,
Cairo,
May 21, 1962.



foreigners); the remainder of the first balcony and a large part of the equally spacious second balcony were filled with guests of various Arab sorts and conditions.

At least half the membership of the Congress could be categorized as peasants or urban poor—a far cry from the pre-Revolutionary days when representative institutions of any kind were totally dominated by an upper-class establishment. The atmosphere was, in fact, distinctly popular. Despite the presence of university professors, highly placed government employees, and others who had the marks of social and financial success, one had the feeling that this was indeed the "people" in their emotional, contradictory, and sometimes exasperating quintessence. There was little parliamentary polish—the President was visibly patient on several occasions when, in clear and almost child-like efforts to please, rhythmic slogans and sporadic responses shouted from floor and balconies interrupted the reading. Yet, these representatives of the "people," these particular selections from the Egyptian mass, seemed to this observer to be generally attentive and intelligent listeners throughout a long, hard evening and seemed to understand what they heard and grasp its implications.

As the President read the Charter, his voice seemed to reflect both a sense of achievement and an awareness of the long pull ahead. There had indeed been achievement aplenty since 1952. Evacuation of a foreign army, nationalization of foreign enterprises (including the Canal), survival of a three-power attack and of the loss of Syria, a high place in the councils of positive neutralism, a pragmatic socialism in process of changing the nation's social structure, a stable regime—all these and others were clear successes in nationalist-socialist eyes.

But there was also thorough justification for feeling that a hard pilgrimage to a distant national shrine was only beginning—and the Charter, in fact, made plain that the social, political, and economic reconstruction necessary to the creation of a modern state was a formidable undertaking. The Charter spoke of the necessity of family planning, the necessity of social justice and solidarity, the necessity of industrialization, and a host of other necessities that collectively mapped out the long and arduous road ahead. It spoke of the necessity of national action rather than glowing words and of the crucial importance of patriotic dedication rather than loyalty to group or class.² It came close, in other words, to identifying the central social and political problem of the UAR, namely, the development of a mass patriotism capable of effective national endeavor and sacrifice.³

² But freedom of worship was strongly stressed.

The making of the modern Egyptian mind is a project that clearly needs institutional assistance, sociological partnership to share the job of reconstruction. If the initial impetus toward structural change has come from the revolutionary but minority minds of the new regime, it is a new institutional structure, fostered and developed by that minority, that will ultimately permit the psychological metamorphosis of the mass. The building of new institutions has proceeded briskly in some sectors of Egyptian life, but the key institution, a national political organization to draw together and rally Egypt's diverse social ranks for the big push into modernity, has not yet, despite several attempts, been properly designed.

The National Congress of Popular Powers represents the latest and most hopeful attempt to launch such an organization. To some of the new regime a popular political institution may mean little beyond a further guarantee of power—and this is, indeed, a basic and necessary consideration. To others, however, it clearly means a positive popular support that can assist the Revolution in reaching solutions to its central problems.

Present Support

What groups now give positive support to the new regime? The question is phrased to include the idea of positiveness in order to exclude the apathetic majority, the nonpatriots who are basically neither for nor against any Egyptian government.

The group that springs first to mind is that of the Free Officers, from which has come the nation's new leadership. But who are the Free Officers and what is their present relation to those in power? Are they only those officers who demonstrated their convictions by joining the movement prior to 1952, or are they all those who have since shown their loyalty to the regime? To what degree do they now influence public policy? And what officers of both high and low ranks are not Free Officers? To these and other basic questions there are few certain answers. One can say little beyond the obvious fact that there is a group of ex-officers and officers whose interests and predilections have a close relation to central control of the machinery of government, the administration of public enterprise, and the armed power of the state. One can say also that there are some officers whose "reactionary" backgrounds and sentiments have clearly disqualified them from positions of possible political influence.

³ See Parts I and II of this Report.

But the important thing to know about the Free Officers, and about the armed forces at their command, is that they are effectively organized. In the sense that the armed forces are composed of officers and men from all classes of society they are indeed a reflection of Egyptian life; they are separate and distinct, however, in their discipline, orderliness, and ability to act quickly. These are qualities of which Egyptian society stands greatly in need today—and these are the qualities that permit the armed forces, in the face of comparative disorganization elsewhere in the nation, to provide without difficulty a rocklike stability for the regime. In control of the armed forces, the Free Officers—led by Vice-President and Commander in Chief Abd El-Hakim Amer, the President's closest associate—provide positive and dedicated support and receive positions of trust in return.

There is another group, a nonmilitary one, that is equally hard to describe—though for different reasons. It is a group of competent and well-educated men, many of them professionally trained, drawn from various backgrounds toward service to the regime. In its composition the group reflects with reasonable accuracy the amorphousness and fluidity of what President Nasser has recently called the middle classes⁴; it has no social unity beyond that provided by a common allegiance to, and a common satisfaction with, present policies and programs. Members of the group are often foreign-educated; some have upper-class connections, but these are usually without the drawback of being by reputation wealthy. If they are not in the main "up from the people," neither do they give the impression of having stooped down from the aristocracy. They ordinarily possess an intellectual sophistication that sets them apart from most of the military elite and places them in a category close to that of university professor (which, in fact, many of them are!).⁵ Most have English rather than French as their second language, and all know good Arabic. Except that some are no

⁴ The President's various statements about the class structure at recent meetings of the National Congress have been interesting. He has mentioned three broad social categories: the reactionary class, the middle classes, and the peasants and workers. In one statement, he equated the bourgeoisie with the reactionary class. He never uses the expression the middle class but always the middle classes (el-tabaqat el-wusta)—the latter permitting the greater definitional fuzziness necessary to a situation of rapid social change.

⁵ This should not imply that most university professors give positive support to the regime. Perhaps most do—but there is no convincing evidence. Intuitively, however, one feels that most professors are patriots in that they care deeply about the country's future.

longer so young (and at least two are now ministers), they might be called the bright young men of government.

These men are associated directly or indirectly with the best efforts of the regime. If the principal job of a member of this group is in a ministry, it is likely to be either creative or relatively well-paid. If it is in one of the increasing number of large public enterprises, it is certainly well-paid and is also at the frontier of national development. If it is on a university faculty, it combines professorial status with respectfully received contributions to various government committees and commissions. Whatever the principal job its salary is generously supplemented, through carefully tended loopholes in "spread-the-work" laws, by part-time appointments to other positions.

These men appear to gravitate toward some sectors of government more than toward others. This may be because of greater challenge, greater need of professionally trained persons, or more effective traditions of man-power development. Whatever the reason, and despite the dangers of generalization, one gains the impression that more such men are to be found in the Ministries of Planning, Social Affairs, Economy, Industry, Information, Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation, and Education, than in other ministries less committed to rapid change. They are economists, administrators and managers, engineers, geographers,⁶ scientists, writers, and educators; taken together, they constitute a remarkable pool of high-level talent⁷ and an important source of positive support for the regime. This does not mean, of course, that they give blind approval to every government action and pronouncement; it does mean that, having weighed the alternatives, they consider the present regime to be much the most capable of grappling with the nation's fundamental problems.

There are other comparably talented persons who are not pro-

⁶ This seemingly small category is included because of the remarkably influential positions of many who were once geographers. Trained chiefly at Cairo University, Egyptian geographers have developed a reputation for competence under unlikely and widely varied circumstances.

⁷ A recent book has this to say: ". . . in terms of recent progress in the development of human resources, [Egypt], is moving forward very rapidly. If one takes into account the existence of the basic institutions necessary for the future upgrading of human resources, Egypt compares favorably even with countries which are economically far more advanced." Harbison, F. H., and Ibrahim, I. A. Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise (New York, 1958), p. 131.

regime—by reason of "reactionary" background, genuine political sentiment, or frustration. There is perhaps little to be done about the first two reasons, but the third exemplifies a difficulty and provides a challenge. The frustrated man of talent is the highly trained person who finds insufficient outlet for his abilities or insufficient remuneration, the would-be patriot who feels unappreciated. Bureaucratic inertia prevents him from achieving clearly needed reforms, major or minor, and discourages the presentation of new ideas and projects; a low salary sends him scurrying to find part-time work that usually does not represent the self-investment necessary to self-improvement and that may destroy his general effectiveness.⁸ If, on the other hand, the government seeks him out and uses his talents efficiently, he may well become a positive support. The challenge to the regime is to rally such talent by overcoming the endemic bureaucratic difficulties that prevent intelligent use of skilled man power.

But one searches in vain to discern other groups or social amalgams that lend positive support to the regime. There are many temporarily proregime individuals, but they do not find, and probably do not seek, the focus on social issues or action that ultimately makes for a political following. The Free Officers have an organization that leads to success in the armed forces or in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy; the bright men of government have various ministry focuses as well as an important auxiliary focus among their intellectual peers in the Egyptian universities. But petty bureaucrats benefiting from a higher cost-of-living law, workers receiving bonuses, and even peasants profiting from new land in land-reform areas may experience momentary delight with the regime, but without an institutional method of transforming that delight into support and responsibility their feelings pass into limbo and become just another example of the tipping relationship that ends immediately after reception of the tip.

The Search

The search for positive political support is not essentially a search for stability. Because it is fundamentally provided by the armed forces, stability is not now one of the regime's great needs. What is needed is the kind of mass political institution that can be used by the

⁸ Perhaps the most soul-destroying part-time job available to the unappreciated is that of correcting the examination papers of overpopulated introductory courses in Egyptian universities. The nearest spiritual counterpart in the USA might be the job of setting up pins in an old-fashioned bowling alley!

regime and its present supporters to effect the psychological and social changes necessary to the emergence of a nation. What is needed is an institutional beacon that can attract the apathetic majority and inspire hard work for patriotic reasons.

The regime has not always been aware of this need. It has attempted to rally popular support on numerous occasions, but the purposes have not been clearly thought out and the necessary institutional maintenance has been lacking or faulty. By putting some of its ideological tenets into decree, for example, the regime may have expected to reap a popularity harvest; if this was indeed the expectation, there was considerable disappointment. The land-reform law of 1952, which limited private holdings to 200 feddans, began the job of breaking the power of the upper class, of establishing a new political climate, and of righting what was felt to be a great wrong. It did not, however, provide more than temporary popularity. The practice of subsidizing the prices of basic foods demonstrates the regime's belief in economic justice as well as the desire to keep people from grumbling, but the sole long-term political result has been a commitment to more of the same. The recently decreed workers' bonus of 10%, which is in line with the regime's genuine desire that workers should have a greater share in profits, is clearly on the way to becoming a rightful expectation rather than a shining reason for support. None of these decrees, in other words, has created political capital available for later investment; none was used for the building of a new institution.

If decrees have been doubtful political investments, the same can certainly be said of the appeal of new doctrine. Arab socialism and positive neutrality are beguiling concepts only to the few; as political levers to move the mass they are useless without a pedagogical system, an indoctrinating institution. And in the same way a dazzling foreign policy brings few political returns. Though no educated person would deny its effectiveness in finding financial assistance from abroad, present policy has resulted in the sustaining of an uncertain economy but without an increased political appreciation on the part of peasantry and urban poor.

Though the regime has for some time been aware of the importance of building a mass political institution, it has not yet done so effectively. The Liberation Rally of early 1953, though it had other reasons for existence, was declared by Gamal Abdel Nasser, its Secretary General, to be "a means to organize popular strength for the reconstruction of a society on a sound new basis."⁹ A basic purpose was clearly to create and regiment the positive popular support needed for rapid

change. But the Liberation Rally had other basic purposes as well—and this confusion of purpose certainly contributed to its failure as a mass political institution. A more fundamental cause of failure, however, was the reluctance to allow genuine involvement and responsibility on the part of any but the ruling group.

The same can be said of the National Union, the successor institution established in 1956. Though the National Union has greater singleness of purpose than its predecessor, it has never successfully reconciled retention of regime authority with greater distribution of national responsibility. After the formation of local councils and the establishment of a national structure, it was clear that Union members at all levels were expected to show enthusiasm toward pronouncements and directives from above rather than to express judgments concerning their advisability—in short, to co-operate rather than to consider. The regime now justifies its untrusting attitude toward the rank and file of the National Union by alluding to "reactionary" penetration, a penetration which by inference was partially reflected in the Union-controlled membership of the National Assembly.¹⁰ In a general review of national problems at the Preparatory Committee of the National Congress of Popular Powers on November 25, 1961, President Nasser put it this way: ". . . then reaction began to exploit our interpretation of the National Union, which . . . represents not a party but all the sons and daughters of the country, because we want to gather the whole country with all its classes within the framework of love and national unity. Reaction discovered an opportunity to penetrate into the National Union and to dominate it In 1960, I felt the revolutionary drive no longer existed. The Revolution began to stumble on capital."

The National Union has other shortcomings as well, but these are secondary when compared with the fundamental impossibility of institutionalizing positive support without a willingness to share the responsibilities of government. The relationships of local and provincial councils, the National Assembly, the National Union Congress, the constitution (provisional or otherwise), the Secretariat of the National Union, and the Supreme Executive Committee for the National Union, have been a constant source of public confusion. At various levels the confusion has been compounded by the presence of other government organizations whose articulation with the efforts of the National Union is hap-

⁹ Cited by Vatikiotis, P. J., The Egyptian Army in Politics (Bloomington, 1961), p. 83. Professor Vatikiotis discusses also (pp. 82-84) the other purposes of the Liberation Rally.

¹⁰ The National Assembly was dissolved by decree on November 7, 1961.

hazard. These and other shortcomings are, however, largely administrative—it is a reasonable guess that a little confusion has not been considered a dangerous thing.

The regime has now publicly recognized that the National Union has not done adequately what it set out to do. Though there have been no recitals of chapter and verse, it is obvious that little has been accomplished in terms of educating the masses to the principles of the Revolution, organizing the masses for rapid change, and fostering social solidarity. In November 1961, at the time of reassessment that followed the defection of Syria, President Nasser implied that the National Union would be reorganized and continued. When he read the Charter for National Action on May 21 of this year, however, it became apparent that even a new name was considered advantageous.

The new political institution is to be known as the Arab Socialist Union. Though the detailed proposal for its establishment has not yet been brought before the National Congress of Popular Powers, there is considerable information at hand. The Charter itself contains not only several clues to the structure of the new mass organization but also to the thinking of the regime about popular organizations generally. President Nasser and others have also made clarifying statements during the Congress sessions.

In the fifth chapter of the Charter, for example, the purposes of the Arab Socialist Union are clearly set forth in terms that might easily have been used in 1956 for the National Union. "There is a dire need to create a new political organization, within the framework of Arab socialist unity,¹¹ to mobilize the elements capable of leadership, to organize their efforts, to clarify the revolutionary motives of the masses, to sound out their needs and endeavor to satisfy them efficiently."¹²

In the same chapter it is made clear that the organizational structure will be similar to that of the National Union. Village and urban neighborhood councils will elect the membership of district councils,

¹¹ Though the new political organization will be called the Arab Socialist Union, the same Arabic phrase can also mean Arab socialist unity (el-ittihad el-ishtiraki el-'arabi). Here the phrase is used in its general sense of the unity of those classes whose members work (i.e., social solidarity rather than unity of the working classes).

¹² This and later quotations from the Charter are from unofficial translations into English and French and have not been checked against the Arabic.

who in turn elect the membership of provincial councils; the latter will probably have a major voice in determining attendance at the Arab Socialist Union Congress, which—like its counterpart, the National Union Congress—will meet annually. The Charter states also that there will be a Representative Assembly (maglis niyabi), but the electoral system for its membership will probably remain unclear until President Nasser presents his proposals to the Congress. Various comments he has made, however, suggest that the elections will not be "vertical"—a term used to describe proportional representation by sector (peasants, workers, students, women, government employees, etc.)—but direct and "horizontal," terms which may finally be interpreted as representation on the basis of several-member constituencies.

It is possible to predict a system of several-member constituencies because the horizontal, or geographical, idea is apparently to be combined with a new principle laid down by the Charter. The new constitution, it says, must include a provision that "farmers and workers will fill half the seats in political and popular organizations at all levels, including the Representative Assembly, since they form the majority of the people." In his comments at the Congress the President has eloquently defended the necessity of the new principle but admits the difficulties of its application. The Congress has so far discussed only the difficulty of definition. Is a peasant one who works the soil with his own hands, who owns less than five feddans, or who lives in a village and may be the 'omda? Is a worker one who works in a factory (skilled or unskilled, private or public sector, managerial or otherwise, are subsidiary questions), or is he any man or woman who works for a living (peasant, intellectual, government employee, etc.)? The President's forthcoming proposals will doubtless resolve many of these definitional problems.

It is clear that those who stand for election to the Representative Assembly must in some way obtain the approval of the Arab Socialist Union. Less clear are the criteria of Union membership and the power relationships between the Union's leadership and its rank and file. There have been hints, however, that the experiences of the past have not been lost on the regime. The membership of the National Union was too inclusive for effective action, and the allocation of responsibility to the rank and file was too little for the development of positive popular support.

The principal hint concerning the responsibilities of local councils and the Representative Assembly is found in the Charter, "The authority of elected popular councils must always be positively asserted

over the authority of the executive machinery of the state. This is the natural order regulating the sovereignty of the people, and it ensures that the people will always be the leader of national action." In a country that has a deeply implanted tradition of administrative authority, this is a truly revolutionary principle—and in his comments President Nasser has confirmed the regime's intention to place the national administration and each local administration under the authority of a corresponding council. Though no one expects this transfer to take place in the immediate future, the fact that the principle is to be included in the new constitution is a significant recognition that responsibility begets positive support.

The millennium has not yet arrived. Perhaps years of rural and urban change must precede the promised future. After approval of the Charter and the proposal for the Arab Socialist Union, the Congress will be dissolved and elections for local Union councils will be held. The Arab Socialist Union Congress will hold its first meeting in October 1962 and make or approve plans for the election of a Representative Assembly. The Assembly will have as its first major responsibility the drafting of a new constitution that will reflect the guiding principles of the Charter. And after these steps will come the regime's greatest domestic challenge: can it, in fact, decentralize and permit the evolution of popular responsibility within the socialist framework?

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Egypt. The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

[All photographs courtesy the Egyptian Government Information Department.]