

## BOOK REVIEW

**Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981–2011**, by Galal Amin, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2011, 173 pp., US\$24.95, ISBN 978 977 416 400 2

When I saw this book displayed on the shelf of my favourite bookstore I did not hesitate to take it down and purchase it straight away. Galal Amin is a towering figure among Arab economists. He also happens to be the brother of Hussein Amin (2007), the former diplomat and writer of a famous booklet, *The Guide of the Lost Muslim*, a courageous and scathing critique of Islamic fundamentalists and extremists during the early 1990s. Also worth mentioning is the fact that the author is the son of Ahmad Amin, a noted historian of Arab and Islamic civilization and a prominent figure of the Nahḍah, an Arab and Islamic renaissance movement with its origins in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These remarks are important because the author is part of an elite group that shaped Egyptian and Arab intellectual landscape and political life in the first half of the twentieth century, yet apparently no longer so nowadays.

*Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981–2011* is a short book consisting of 173 pages. It is an account of Egyptian society during the last 60 years or so. Although the title would suggest a description of the Mubarak era, it is not strictly confined to such and also describes the pre-revolutionary period as well the revolution itself. Mubarak's era connotes what is essentially the last chapter of the transformations that took place in Egypt following the revolution of 1952.

Though the book is an account of these changes, it is also about the author himself. All throughout the book the reader cannot but sense the author's pervasive nostalgia for a bygone era. His yearning for pre-revolution days is markedly strong and that does create something of a problem. This is the reason why the author is also among prominent Arab nationalists and in his early youth he was close to the Baath party, an Arab nationalist party founded in the late 1940s taking many of its cues from the Christian Syrian Arab nationalist writer Michel Aflaq. In more direct terms, confessing any sort of yearning for pre-revolutionary years is tantamount to an act of 'blasphemy' to any committed Arab nationalist!

However, in all fairness, the author *does* acknowledge the accomplishments of the revolution. Yet, such accomplishments as the enlargement of the middle class and its empowerment provoke his nostalgia. In his youth the author belonged to the small middle-class segment – patriotic, educated and sophisticated. The revolution attracted the largely impoverished rural population before the revolution and facilitated its entry into the middle class. Though it acquired the education requisite to be part of it, it never attained to the sophistication of the older established middle class. In this respect, the author betrays some alienation, an alienation to which he devotes an entire chapter towards the end of the book (Chapter 10).

The author divides his account into thirteen well-written concise chapters. The longest one (24 pages) is the third where he describes corruption in Egypt. His account covers the period of the monarchy as well the revolution in its three phases: those of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. He distinguishes between the corruption prevailing in the early period of the monarchy and that of the latter part (p. 21).

Perhaps the least amount of corruption that Egypt has known during the last two centuries was in the 1920s and 1930s, that is, the two decades immediately following the 1919 revolution and the introduction of a modern constitution in 1923. (pp. 21–22)

The later years of the monarchy were ridden with scandal and characterized by poor behaviour of the royal palace and the coterie of the king.

The chapter also provides an account of the middle class in Egypt: its fight against the British occupation, its edification and how it held public service in high esteem. In fact, Amin defines as being a member of the middle class any person who is educated, where the class as a whole had 'admirable traits that it gradually lost during the second half' of the twentieth century (p. 23). Its main source of growth in the first half of the century was education. As growth in commerce, agriculture and industry was 'exceedingly slow', such was left to foreign nationals (p. 24). 'A high standard of education combined with a strong feeling of patriotism among the middle classes tended to strengthen moral sense and disdain for anything that hinted of corruption' (p. 23). On the basis of such attributes, the author contends, the middle class would have

a more rational understanding of religion, less shaped by superstition and affectation. It was, then, quite possible to reconcile a powerful religious sentiment with a robust sense of patriotism, a very rational view of life, and a great tolerance for the adherents of other religions and for conflicting viewpoints. (p. 24)

These remarks are important because they constitute the key to Amin's view of the revolution and what it brought. He laments the corruption brought by a larger, expanded middle class who did not lack education or patriotic sentiments and sensibilities but which was never like the predecessor middle class during the heyday of the Wafd Party in the 1920s and 1930s. This is a recurrent theme throughout the book that reveals an elitist streak in the author. Patriotism, so it seems, is or ought to be the property of a bygone middle class.

The revolution brought rising expectations about increased social mobility. During the Nasser era corruption was still limited because of the integrity of the ruler and his appointment of honest people. However, corruption as defined by Amin, started when appointments would take place where the criterion of loyalty to the revolution superseded the criteria of competence and efficiency. Social mobility would be enhanced not necessarily by education, but also by nearness to the centres of power. In the Sadat and Mubarak periods inflation and discontent over a deteriorating distribution of income and rising disparities 'must have created a greater motivation for people to use special influence to gain upward mobility or at least prevent downward mobility' (pp. 25–26).

Corruption during the monarchical period, on the other hand, was limited due to the narrow scope of government activity.

Government officials before the revolution had held less power compared to those who came afterward, so the opportunities to exploit their power were necessarily limited.

The situation changed after the revolution with the increase in laws and restrictions on individual activities imposed by the new government, in addition to the weakness afflicting municipalities. (p. 29)

In contrast, during the first phase of the revolution, 'a surprisingly austere life prevailed among the middle class in Egypt in the days of Nasser' and 'because of this general austerity, there was little opportunity for corruption' (pp. 30–31). This was *not* due to the fact that Nasser set a good example, but as a result of 'the general climate that encouraged respect for the law and kept corruption at a low' (p. 31). Amin attributes burgeoning corruption after Nasser to 'the change in Egypt's social and economic conditions, as well as the change in the general international climate' (p. 31).

Over the last twenty years a number of powerful elements have conjoined to produce a degree of corruption among various sections of Egyptian society the like of which had never been seen before in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or even in pre-revolutionary Egypt (p. 41). First, there

was a weak state that lost both the power and the will to punish those transgressing the law, with no commitment to a national project which could unite the people, but which attached the greatest importance to currying favor with a certain foreign power that protects it and grants it aid. (p. 41)

This is, indeed, a key sentence in understanding what happened in Egypt in January 2001, where events connoted a total rejection of this weak state and the absence of a national project. A second factor that exacerbated corruption was the decline in respect for learning and academic credentials concomitant with an erosion of the prestige of holding ministerial offices. Furthermore,

external pressure on the state to sell one public company after another to foreign buyers at less than their true value has become increasingly apparent, while state-owned lands have been sold at bargain prices to influential people ... who would resell them at the new price. (p. 41)

In fact,

a close bond has been formed between wealth and political decision-makers to the extent that it was not regarded as odd that at least six government ministers might be appointed in a single government, each of whom was put in charge of a ministry closely related to the field of his commercial dealings prior to and after his government post. (p. 42)

Amin's analysis of the economy is his forte. He recognizes that Nasser's era saw the establishment of an economy based on industrial production and the encouragement of agriculture. Growth rates for gross domestic product (GDP) were quite high on an annual basis (6%). Per capita income grew at 3.2% per annum (p. 50). Manufacturing growth was 8.5% per annum. Amin acknowledges the wisdom, the sincerity, the integrity and the competence of decision-makers under Nasser, yet he offers a more sober explanation. He contends that 'one must acknowledge that the main factor behind the positive economic performance of the period was the prevailing international climate and not any domestic factor' (p. 51). Had it not been, it seems, for this favourable climate, the Suez Canal nationalization and the building of the Aswan Dam would not have been possible:

The successful nationalization of the Suez Canal and the forced withdrawal of Israeli, French, and British forces, and Israel's occupation of the Sinai in reaction to the nationalization, would never have happened without the Americans' and Soviets' united stand behind Nasser and their endorsement of the nationalization of the Canal. (p. 52)

Further, Amin asks rhetorically: 'Could Egypt have built the High Dam of Aswan, financed its ambitious industrialization program, or embarked on an even more ambitious five-year plan without this stream of Soviet and American aid?' (p. 52). He concludes that as soon this international climate changed, 'Nasser lost most of his magic and his leadership of Egypt, the Arabs' (p. 53). This statement is certain to raise eyebrows, and this reviewer believes that Amin's comment is unwarranted and unsubstantiated; however, this is a matter of debate, beyond the scope of this review.

After Nasser's death, Sadat took a diametrically opposed strategy and launched an 'open-door' policy for the economy (*infitah*) in 1974 that led to an influx of imported consumer goods (which had previously been strictly limited) and the rise and growth of the services industry. However, this policy was accompanied by an increasing amount of indebtedness. It continued during the first five years of Mubarak's rule where Egypt's external debt reached US\$45 billion. The increase in indebtedness persisted until the First Gulf War in 1991 where it reached 150% of Egypt's GDP. As such, *it was one of highest debt burdens in the world*. Egypt's participation in that war brought a significant debt relief. As a reward for such participation Egypt received promises of aid of more than US\$4.7 billion from several Gulf countries, a debt forgiveness of US\$13.6 billion from the United States, and a waiver of 50% of its debt by the Paris Club. As a result of such 'arrangements' Egyptian foreign debt was reduced from US\$47.6 billion in June 1990 to US\$34 billion in February 1991 and then again to US\$24 billion in mid-1994 – to almost half of what it had been in 1990 (p. 58). However, such financial relief came at a tremendous political cost to Egypt. It lost much of its credibility within the Arab world and had to comply with humiliating International Monetary Fund (IMF) directives.

The impact of such directives – termed 'structural adjustment' – was the further impoverishment of the Egyptian population. Mubarak would not, however, do anything to displease the IMF, the United States or Israel. Corruption, dependency on the United States and impoverishment of the masses eventually led to his downfall. Amin is quite critical of the IMF directives and their pernicious impact on Egypt's population. However, the thrust of his book lies elsewhere. His musings about the poor, the intellectuals, the media belie little more than a yearning for a bygone era. He is among the very few who venture into the 'nostalgic period' of the pre-revolutionary era. He *is* careful to say 'pre-revolution' so as not to vindicate the monarchical period; and in the end he cannot dissociate himself from the achievements of the revolution at the domestic, Arab or international levels.

Amin's book is at times thoughtful, at other times nostalgic for the monarchical period but – by and large favourable – towards the early period of the revolution. He is less sanguine about Sadat and definitely critical of Mubarak. Readers will likely find his book engaging at times, if infuriating at others. This reviewer's feeling is a peculiar mixture of disappointment and interest: disappointment because of higher expectations from a person of Amin's stature; interest because of some insightful comments made about the middle class in Egypt.

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**Reference**

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