Egyptian Pan-Arabism in the Pre-Mubarak Era

Dr. Amel Khireddine [1,*]

[1] Boumerdes University (Algeria)

Received: 07 juillet 2020 ; **Revised:** 15 Novembre 2020 ; **Accepted:** 23 janvier 2021

Abstract:

In his efforts to found a vigorous Pan-Arab nation, the second Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser initiated radical domestic and foreign programs, which entangled him in constant clashes with the West and Israel. His successor, Anwar Al Sadat introduced new internal and political policies that put Nasser's Pan-Arabism plan at stake. As such, this paper aims at debunking the political and linguistic policies embraced by Egyptian leaders in the pre-Mubarak era to establish or loosen Pan-Arabism. While Nasser was keen on upholding a strong unified Arab nation; his successors displayed, through their presidential agendas, a total disregard of "Pan-Arabism", emphasising instead Pan-Egyptianism.

Keywords: Pan-Arabism; Egyptian nationalism; the Umma; Nasser; Sadat.

1- Introduction

The 1952 Egyptian Revolution, which overthrew the monarchy and established a republic, was inevitable. Gamal Abdel Nasser wrote in his memoirs, titled *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1955): "The July 23 Revolution represented the realisation of a long cherished hope – a hope entertained by the Egyptian people in modern times to aspire to self-government with the last word in determining their own destiny" (10). Nasser came to office in 1954 with a presidential agenda based on uniting Egyptian and Arab nationalism together or "Pan-Arabism". Nasser considered Egypt as the legitimate leader of the Arab world, a leader which should take on its shoulders the responsibility of solidifying and uniting the Arab nation-states in one nation against any encroachments of the West and more particularly Israel (Marsot, 2007: 130-131). In his attempts to found a robust Pan-Arab nation, Nasser introduced a radical foreign plan, which entangled him in constant clashes not only with the West and Israel, but also with a number of Arab states. With the coming of his successor, Anwar Al Sadat, new domestic and political policies were put into practice. As such, this paper aims at shedding light on the political and linguistic policies embraced by Egyptian rulers in the pre-Mubarak era to establish or loosen Pan-Arabism. While Nasser was eager to maintain a strong united Arab nation; his successors displayed, through

* Corresponding author : e-mail: khireddine.amel@outlook.fr .

their governmental agendas, a total unconcern of "Pan-Arabism", stressing instead Pan-Egyptianism.

2. Political Policy towards Pan-Arabism

Nasser's declaration of the nationalisation of the Anglo-French controlled Suez Canal Company in 1956 was the official starting point of his constant conflict with the West. His deed mirrors his denunciation of the Western interference in the Arab world. Basically, this came as a reaction to the Anglo-Saxon agreement to fund the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Eventually, in November 1956, an Anglo-French power attacked Egypt in the Suez campaign and concomitantly, Israeli forces invaded the Sinai Peninsula. A United Nations truce put an end to the European invasion when American troops entered and the British and French troops, trailed by the Israelis, pulled back (Ashour et al., 2008: 116).

Despite being vanquished militarily after the European invasion, Nasser surfaced as the foremost Arab national hero to be able to stand fearlessly in the face of the Western powers (Marsot, 2007: 137). Indeed, his description of the war as a major Arab triumph over the powers of imperialism and Zionism guaranteed him the leadership of the Arab world. Nasser's political victory culminated a decade of political unrest throughout which the nation endeavoured to disentangle itself from British control as well as to seek an effective political system that would overthrow the old one. A sense of optimism in a promising future of the nascent nation found its way towards Egyptian spirits. Nasser soon turned into a symbol of revolution against the Western influences in the Arab states, which further triggered revolutionary movements in the Middle East, calling for Pan-Arabism. As an initial step towards Pan-Arabism, Egypt formed with Syria the United Arab Republic in 1958 which was dissolved three years later, when Syria seceded from the union after the 1961 Syrian *coup d'état*.

On the fifth of June 1967, Israel resumed its attacks against Arab forces in Egypt, ruining the Egyptian air force in a few hours. In a matter of days, in a series of wars with Israel, the Arab crush was absolute. Yet, the material defeat was nothing when compared to the deep sense of humiliation and dishonour felt by most Arabs who took part in the war (Metz, 1991: 69). Indeed, the psychological setback was far worse than the territorial losses. After this Arab *Nekba*, and in an attempt to cut all bridges with Western political and cultural imperialism, young people sought a return to more traditional cultural and religious practices (Marsot, 2007: 163). Islamic fundamentalism turned to be the order of the day.

These historical events greatly shaped the Arab artistic scene. The effect was patent in the literary productions of the Arab writers of that epoch. Narratives of war, exile, alienation and East/West relations proved recurrent themes in their novels. For instance, in her 1992 novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, the Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif depicts a scene at Cairo University where a group of students who have come from various Arab states namely Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Palestine and Syria voice their ire at the 1967 defeat. The heroine, Asya Ulama, is among the enraged and ardent students willing to take part in defending their territories. Triggering a sense of Arab solidarity that abrogates the feeling of depression generated by the defeat, this group of students might stand as a microcosm of all Arab states.

Anwar Al Sadat succeeded to Nasser after his death in 1970, becoming the third president of Egypt. Sadat was known for his support of Islamic groups as a defensive strategy against his dissenters most notably the leftists and liberal intellectuals. In this connection, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot (2007) explains: "On coming to power Sadat freed the Muslim Brothers from prison and made them his allies against the Nasserite ideology then current" (163).

Unlike his predecessor's ideology, built on Pan-Arabism and antagonism towards the West, Sadat appeared to labour for closer ties with the Western world, especially America and Israel at the expense of nurturing ties with Arab brethren (Marsot, 2007: 163). Indeed, both the open-door policy (*Infitah*) and the Camp David accords with Israel in 1978 over retrieving the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian territories, one of the objectives of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, were to stir social and political belligerence towards the Sadat regime. The more he gained an eminent stance in the international scene, the more he seemed to lose touch with his countrymen and the Arab world (Marsot, 2007: 162).

Besides, Sadat's mono-actions and decisions as well as his indifference to his cabinet's advisers and public opinion further nurtured feelings of distrust and animosity towards his regime. In the meantime, religious activists were weaving solid threads for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism which would wrap the entire Egyptian society throughout his term. In this connection, a historian comments: "In his attempts to use the 'religious weapon' for his own political purposes, Sadat failed to realize that the Islamic movement had acquired an independent life and logic of its own" (Ayubi, 2003: 74). In so doing, as Marsot (2007) posits, "he helped create a movement that he neither understood nor controlled" (163). Therefore, by advertently manipulating religion for his own political interests,

Sadat contributed to intensifying the breach between secular and Islamic national identity.

Religious affiliations made new disciples among Egyptian people: young and old, in universities and other social arenas, proved staunch adherents of Islamic groups. One of the upshots of this Islamisation was the way of dressing, which soon became the hallmark of the day. Women, for instance, took to wearing long gowns with long sleeves and a head cover evocative of a nun's habit (Marsot, 2007: 163). Men, likewise, embraced more reserved clothing than the open shirts, tight pants and gold chains that were the mode of attire at that time (Marsot, 2007: 163). Gradually, Islamic associations began to display antagonism toward any form of Westernisation that swept the nation after 1977. To that end, they organised an authentic opposition. They deemed that only a return to their traditions and Islamic ethics could reestablish an unbiased government, one that shunned corruption and the exploitation of authority, and that stayed away from the West and acted to its own advantage, not on the word of the enemy (Marsot, 2007: 164). The Muslim groups then set a comprehensive way to deal with society where religious standards turned into the belief system for conduct in all practices including both man's relationship with his creator and his human relationships (Marsot, 2007: 165).

While Sadat's death moved the Americans as though he had been one of them, it hardly stirred the Egyptians' sympathy. Indeed, by signing the notorious peace treaty with Israel, Sadat had rendered the United States and Israel a great service. Marsot (2007) comments:

> *The delirium that greeted the death of Nasser, who had lost wars and allowed his country to become invaded by a foreign occupier, but was regarded as a true Egyptian, was matched by indifference for the death of a leader who had brought peace to the country and regained the conquered territories, but who had become too closely identified with the West. That is one of the major ironies of history. (166)*

Although Nasser failed to achieve victory in the wars waged against the West and Israel, he was established a great icon simply because his fight was for the unification of all Arabs in one nation. Conversely, Sadat restored peace and territories, yet was despised by his countrymen for his disinterest to pursue Nasser's Pan-Arabism plan and thus to loosen ties with the Arab world. Also, unlike the Nasseriste ideology, which curtailed the spread of Islamism, Sadat manipulated Islamists to disrupt the coherence of the leftists, so that he could

peacefully carry out his open-door policy with the West and more precisely the United States.

However, reorientation towards the Arab world during Nasser's regime, and the ensuing sense of Arab identification that developed did not challenge the deeper sentiment of Egyptian identity felt by many articulate Egyptians (Jankowski, 1997). In a paper entitled "Identity, Culture and Democratization: The Case of Egypt" (2005), Nicola Pratt analyses a series of events encompassing a human rights report about police violence in post-independent Egypt to show how the struggle to recreate Egyptian national identity influences the way democracy is exercised. Pratt argues that in the course of seeking an "authentic" Egyptian identity, uncorrupted by Western influences, a critical mass of contemporary Egyptian civil society takes part in producing a political consensus that eliminates the possibility of fluidity and heterogeneity, thus contributing to creating a climate in which civil and political freedoms might be justifiably sacrificed for the sake of national union and security (73-90).

3. Linguistic Policy towards Pan-Arabism

Britain pursued a different pattern of colonisation from France, a pattern mostly apparent in its linguistic policy. While French colonisation aimed at assimilating its colonies known as French territories overseas, the British did not regard their Arab colonies as part of Britain (Bassiouney, 2015: 92). For instance, the attitude of the French when they colonised Algeria was to turn it into part of France and to eradicate the Arabic language by making French the official language in all public domains. The linguistic policy in colonial Egypt was different. Although the British did attempt to weaken standard Arabic in Egypt, the influence of foreign languages namely English was not as robust as in the North African colonies. Lord Palmerston, British Prime Minister from 1855-1858 and 1859-1865, summed up the attitude of at least a part of the British establishment before the colonisation of Egypt as follows:

> *We do not want Egypt or wish it for ourselves, any more than any rational man with an estate in the north of England and a residence in the south would have wished to possess the inns on the North road. All he could want would have been that the inns should be well-kept, always accessible, and furnishing him, when he came, with mutton-chops and post-horses. (qtd. in Ashley, 1879: 337-338)*

Rather than a province or a territory overseas, Britain viewed Egypt as the "inns" on the road, and albeit English was announced an official language alongside Arabic in Egypt, Sudan and Palestine, Britain had no interests in inflicting its

language by force on the Egyptians the way France did with Algerians (Bassiouney, 2015: 93).

During the British occupation which spanned a period of seventy years (1882 to 1952), the colonial administration implemented measures to debilitate the position of Arabic (Shivtiel, 1999: 131-140). First, they presented European languages, English and French, as languages of civilisation and therefore as essential languages in the educational system. Second, they attempted to promote the status of Egyptian colloquial Arabic to the detriment of standard Arabic by accentuating the peculiarity of the Egyptian identity, as opposed to the Arab identity which had a political dimension and was linked to colonial policies (Bassiouney, 2015: 93).

It is only with the rise of Egyptian nationalism, which in turn led to the process of liberation from British control, that the Egyptian nationalist intelligentsia felt the urgency to revive Arabic language. Amidst his term as Minister of Education between 1906 and 1910, Saad Zaghlul took the initiative to exert significant reforms in language education policy. Arabic became the official language of teaching in schools instead of the imperial language English. Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel (1999) indicates that "the introduction of Arabic as a required language constituted a turning point in Egypt's national education system" (137).

Nevertheless, apart from religious schools, which were tightly supervised by Al-Azhar scholars, English and French remained largely utilised in state schools as the principal tools for instruction. Substantial reforms in education saw the light of the day at the hands of two notable intellectuals and politicians: Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888– 1956) and Taha Hussein (1889– 1973). An Azhar graduate writer, Hussein produced a considerable number of works that impacted the recovery of Arabic. He advocated the removal of the instruction of foreign languages in elementary education. As a zealous supporter of Arabic, Hussein believed that if Egyptians disregarded standard Arabic, they would cut themselves off from their past and their Arab literary legacy altogether (Bassiouney, 2015: 96).

When Nasser came to office after the 1952 Revolution, he pursued a rigorous linguistic policy that stresses the substantiality of teaching Arabic language as the sole tongue which unifies all Arabs in one single nation. His linguistic policy stipulated the extension of education to every Egyptian individual, offering free education to the whole population and making primary education compulsory. Shivtiel (1999) states, "Egypt, in its efforts to achieve

national unity during the 1950s and 1960s, positioned literary Arabic at the core of its educational system and utilised it as the cornerstone in the development of the image of the young generation in the Arab World" (131).

Indeed, the 1952 Revolution altered both the attitude and approach towards Arabic language. Classical Arabic literature and poetry, together with Islamic resources, began to be strategically instructed in schools as vehicles to forge patriotic feelings amongst the younger generation of Egyptians, as well as to boost the pan-Arab movement. Egyptian nationalists then promoted the image of Egypt as part and parcel of the Arab nation. In his 1960 address in the United Nations, Nasser unambiguously declared: "We announce that we believe in a single Arab nation. The Arab nation was always united linguistically. And linguistic unity is unity of thought" (Dajani, 1973: 119-137).

4- Conclusion

Egypt's history has been stamped by a complicated choreography around the terms Muslim, Arab and Egyptian as bearers of an authentic identity and national belonging (Al-Ali, 2000: 41). Although Pan-Arab nationalism knew a gradual decline under Sadat and later Mubarak, the increasing passion for pan-Islamism and the expansion of the *Umma*, this sense of religious belonging in which one's religious community is perceived to be the object of ultimate loyalty (Jankowski et al., 1986: 193) beyond national boundaries is often connected to an identification with the Arab Muslim world.

5. Bibliography List :

- Al-Ali, N., Ali, N. S., & Nadje, A. A. (2000). *Secularism, gender and the state in the Middle East: the Egyptian women's movement* (Vol. 14). Cambridge University Press.

- Ashley, A. E. M. (1879). *The life and correspondence of Henry John Temple, viscount Palmerston* (Vol. 1). R. Bentley & son.

- Ashour, R., Ghazoul, F., & Reda-Mekdashi, H. (Eds.). (2008). *Arab women writers: A critical reference guide, 1873-1999*. Oxford University Press.

- Ayubi, N. (2003). *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world*. Routledge.

- Bassiouney, R. (2015). *Language and identity in modern Egypt*. Edinburgh University Press.

- Dajani, A. S. (1973). *Abd al-Nasir wa-al-thawrah al-Arabiyah*. Dar al-Wahdah.

- Gershoni, I., Gēršônî, Y., & Jankowski, J. P. (1986). *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The search for Egyptian nationhood, 1900-1930*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

- Jankowski, J. P., & Gershoni, I. (1997). *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*. Columbia University Press.

- Marsot, A. L. A. S. (2007). *A history of Egypt: from the Arab conquest to the present*. Cambridge University Press.

- Metz, H. C. (1991). A country study: Sudan. In *Federal Research Division Library of Congress*.

- Nasser, G. A. (1955). Egypt's Liberation the Philosophy of the Revolution.

- Pratt, N. (2005). Identity, culture and democratization: the case of Egypt. *New Political Science*, *27*(1), 69-86.

- Shivtiel, S. S. (1999). Language and political change in modern Egypt. *International journal of the sociology of language*, *137*(1), 131-140.

- Soueif, A. (1992). *In the Eye of the Sun*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

How to cite this article by the APA style:

Amel Khireddine, (2020). ***Egyptian Pan-Arabism in the Pre-Mubarak Era.*** Humanization Journal for Research and Studies. 11 (02). Algeria: Djelfa University. 405-412.