

'Abduh and the 'Urabi Revolution (1881-2): From supportive observer to active participant

In September 1881, the Egyptian army officer Ahmad 'Urabi headed a military demonstration to the 'Abdin place, the seat of the khedive, and demanded the dismissal of Riyad's government and the full reinstatement of Chamber of Deputies following new elections. This event is usually seen as marking the beginning of the 'Urabi Revolution which began as an initiative to address grievances of Egyptian army officers and turned into a revolutionary movement challenging both the position of the khedive and European control over Egypt. Despite the semi-autonomous status of Egypt within the Ottoman Empire, the state bureaucracy and the officers' corps of the Egyptian army were dominated by Circassians, a Turkish-speaking elite, brought in from different parts of the empire by Muhammad 'Ali to ensure that he could rely on a body of loyal bureaucrats, courtiers and army officers without any social ties to the local Egyptian population. While many Circassians intermarried into Egyptian families and assimilated into Egyptian society and Arabic had replaced Turkish as the official language of the administration, Circassian dominance was particularly pronounced in the Egyptian army where Turkish was still used and the positions of senior officer were not available to native Egyptians.¹¹⁴

Ahmad 'Urabi was a colonel in the Egyptian army - the most senior position an Egyptian could hold. 'Urabi led the first confrontation between Egyptian army officers and the government in January 1881 when he and his colleagues demanded the dismissal of the Circassian minister of war for blocking the further promotion of Egyptian officers. 'Urabi and the other officers were arrested but rescued by their own battalions forcing Prime Minister Riyad and Khedive Tawfiq to pardon them. The arrest, rescue and pardon initiated the politicization of 'Urabi and other army officers. From February to September 1881, 'Urabi frequented the political and intellectual circles of reformist intellectuals and notables, meeting 'Abduh and members of the Chamber of Deputies who identified both the unchecked authority of the khedive and increasing foreign dependency as problems they considered the government unable to address. 'Urabi and notables who sought to expand the power of the Chamber of Deputies presented themselves as champions of the people seeking to curb the despotism of the Khedive Tawfiq and his government and to address the severe economic challenges foreign dependency had brought.¹¹⁵

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The military demonstration at the 'Abdin Palace in September 1881 forced Tawfiq to dismiss Riyad's government, to promise the election of a new Chamber of Deputies and to increase the size of the Egyptian army. The 'Abdin demonstration turned 'Urabi and the Egyptian army into the central player of Egyptian politics. The newly elected Chamber of Deputies which convened in December 1881 was constituted according to the law of 1866 which ensured the dominance of wealthy landowners and merchants. Equally, the new parliament did not initially call for expanding its powers but was unequivocal in rejecting the dual control regime, posing thereby a challenge to the influence and power of France and Britain over Egyptian politics. The insistence of both countries in maintaining dual control regime illustrated how the power of the khedive increasingly depended on European support.

'Abduh initially disagreed with the dismissal of Riyad Pasha, his erstwhile patron, but retained his position of editor of *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya* and used his position to provide cautious support for the demands and changes made by 'Urabi and his supporters within the parliament and the new government while at the same time countering the notion that the 'Abdin demonstration and its fallout mark a revolutionary change in Egyptian politics. In the first months of the 'Urabi Revolution, 'Abduh positions himself as a voice of moderation supporting the measures implemented by the new government while affirming the political authority of the khedive.¹¹⁶ In a series of articles on 'the political life' published in November 1881, 'Abduh oscillates between affirming enlightened despotism to achieve progress and development, on the one hand, and advocating freedom (*hurriyya*) and political rights (*al-huqūq al-siyāsiyya*),¹¹⁷ on the other. 'Abduh embeds the discussion of these two poles within an evolutionary scheme of the development of human social and political consciousness which evolves in three consecutive phases: the first, most primitive, phase is that of 'innate disposition (*fiṭra*) which is the natural existence (*al-wujūd al-ṭabī'ī*)'¹¹⁸ and followed by the second phase, 'the phase of society (*al-ijtimā'*) which is the state of civilization (*al-madaniyya*)'.¹¹⁹ Providing an evolutionary reading of Ibn Khaldun's and Nasir al-Din Tusi's political philosophy, 'Abduh outlines the progression from a natural, unruly form of human life to the formation of societies which as part of more complex social interaction and division of labour leads to the creation of civilization. The third phase is that of politics (*siyāsa*).¹²⁰

For 'Abduh, the particular challenge of the current historical moment lies in the transition Egypt experiences from the second to the third phase which will result in the complete political maturation of Egyptian society. However, Egypt has not yet arrived there and requires the guidance of an enlightened ruler, 'a wise