CHAPTER 5

THE IDEA OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL POWER
Nasser laid great emphasis on the national identity of his concept of socialism. This was declared in the The Charter: "The Arab revolutionary experiment... cannot afford to copy what others have achieved".\(^1\) Nasser's argument is that the changes in the world and specific features of Egypt's history made it necessary to choose new ways and methods. The experience of others can be taken into consideration, but "...the Arab Revolution must have a new approach that does not shut itself up within the confines of theories, which are at once limited and limiting".\(^2\) He went on to say that "at this critical stage in the national struggle other popular movements suffer a setback when in their internal changes they follow theories which do not arise out of national experience... The real solutions to the problems of the people cannot be imported from the experience of another". The national movement should take into account the practical foreign experience, however.\(^3\)

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2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Ibid., pp. 35-36.
What are the motives behind the emphasis on national identity of the Nasserite concept of socialism? Such an emphasis emanates from a sense of pragmatism to retain power to further revolutionary process. Furthermore, Nasser desired to keep a distance from existing socialism which carried some negative lessons for the Third World. These motives made Nasserism somewhat eclectic and provided it with some new peculiar features. The basic aspect in the relation of Nasserism to communist ideas was that, in Nasser's thought, Arab Socialism itself was the end goal, not a stage leading to communism. Consequently he drew a sharp line between Arab Socialism and the socio-political set up of the socialist countries. He pointed out that "the Soviet Union is a communist state but we wish to become a socialist state".

Heikal demarcates the difference between Arab Socialism and communism in five respects. The first difference lies in the method of solution of class-conflicts. In Heikal's view, the communist standpoint on class struggle and proletarian dictatorship

tantamounts to the physical annihilation of the ruling classes while Arabs resolve their class-differences within the framework of national unity. The second difference is seen by Heikal in the concept of ownership. "While in the communist view, every kind of private ownership is at once exploiting" then Arab Socialism acknowledges that kind of ownership "which the owner cannot use for exploitation and for ruling over others". The third difference is with regard to the nationalization which in socialist countries is a "tool of punishment and vengeance", in contrast to Egyptian nationalization which has been carried out "in a responsible and patriotic way" through indemnity. Fourthly, "in the communist society everything belongs to the State. The individual is a tool... one sole gear in the machinery,... an automation without individual desires and illusions", whereas in Arab Socialism "the state is a tool in the hands of the people to guarantee justice". In communism, the communist party is the only political organisation whose authority is supreme and irrevocable, while democracy of Arab Socialism is for all the people. In Heikal's vision communists are interested only in the future and generations of today sacrifice themselves and national resources at the altar of production, but in Arab socialist thinking the relation between
the individual and history is balanced, the man is not only an object of history but also its creator. "Servility and initiative, immobility and dynamism, blind fanaticism and free thinking" - these are the most characteristic differences between communism and Arab Socialism as described by Heikal. The material and tendency of the argument is not basically different in the publications of other authors on Nasserism either.

The common features of these views are: a critical approach to the prevailing form of socialism, a desire to avoid the faults of the two world systems counterposed with a crude and idealized Arab Socialism and an effort to achieve internal peace and alliance of national forces. The Arab Socialism envisaged a society in which the working forces would cooperate with the national bourgeoisie, peasants form cooperatives, socialism would cooperate with religion, individual Arab countries would cooperate with each other.


6. For example, Fathi Ghanem, a Nasserite intellectual from the circle of the weekly Roz el-Youssef advocated that Arab Socialism should find a third road between the business-oriented Western thinking and the suppressing Communism and has to be based upon minimum sacrifice and strong identity of the individual. Fathi Ghanem, "Our Socialism in Relation to Capitalism and Communism", Ibid., pp. 162-5.
inspite of their socio-economic differences and Egypt would cooperate with the West and with the Soviet Union. "Cooperation" seems to be obviously one key-term of Nasserism, but its implementation remained partial and limited since the policy of cooperation did not involve the masses.

Naturally, there were groups which criticised the concept of national identity. Lutfi al-Kholi noted thinker and columnist revealed the incongruity between the slogan of national unity and the oppressive measures to implement it. In other words, it is well known that the Nasserites while criticising the illegal acts of the Stalinist era in the socialist countries, adopted very similar methods to silence the opposition. In Kholi's view Arab identity has to be respected, the alliance of the forces which are ready to work for the implementation of the revolutionary objectives has to be forged and, within such an alliance, the socially and ideologically distinct political forces have to be given the chance to speak. Lutfi al-Kholi also rejected the Nasserite thesis on "keeping distance from foreign ideas". He wrote: "The accusations regarding imported ideas in the last third of the Twentieth century, when man has reached the Moon, reflect intellectual
backwardness rather than a reactionary attitude....
As part of Humanity, we cannot cut ourselves off from its progress. We influence it and at the same time are influenced by it.7

Yet another feature of the national identity of Nasserism can be found in its ideological and political approach to religion. Among the earliest factors shaping Nasser's attitude of Islam was the intellectual impact of liberal reformism in contemporary Arab thinking. Authors of Nasser's biographies particularly underscore the influence of Abdu, Mustafa Kamel and Lutfi as-Sayyid. These champions of Egyptian nationalism were not atheists. Bassam Tibi, a scholar of Syrian origin, and author of Arab Nationalism pointed out that although the revolutionary nationalists advocated a harmonious coexistence of religion and nation they believed that ultimately the two diverge, Islam losing its claim to universality and getting subordinated to nationalism. These reformers strove for religious reforms to the extent that such reforms strengthened the position of nationalism; they sympathized with pan-Islamism in as much as it promoted the

liberation struggle against the British and if ever they associated themselves with the European liberal-democratic traditions they deviated from the legal and political traditions of Islam.8

Beside Egyptian reformers, the "father of pan-Arab thought", the Syrian Sati al-Husri (1894-1961) also left a marked influence on Nasser's thinking. Nasser's "three circles" can be traced back to Husri's "five bonds", i.e. African, Mediterranean, Pharaonic, Islamic and Arab. Out of these five, Husri gradually came to advocate the Arab circle as the most crucial of all.9 In The Philosophy of the Revolution, the Islamic bond is only one, and not the most important one, of the three circles. One significant idea of the book is that the religious circle "encompasses continents and oceans", unites Muslims living in different countries and obliges Egypt to further develop relations with the Islamic world along political lines. "The Pilgrimage", Nasser wrote, "should have a potential political power... a periodic political conference wherein the heads of all Islamic

States, opinion makers, scientists, eminent industrialists and prominent businessmen assemble to draw up... the broad lines of policies to be adopted by their respective countries and lay down the principles ensuring their close cooperation...."10 Thus the religiosity of Arab masses emerges as an important reality which should be utilized for constructive political objectives.

Nasser's theoretical perception of the role of religion comes out well in some parts of The Charter and his speeches of the 1960s. But the Free Officers to begin with, faced the problem as to what their practical relation to "official Islam" should be and how they should handle the Muslim Brotherhood as a political movement.

The attitude of the Officers to "official Islam" was determined mainly by their realistic assessment of the country's economic and spiritual conditions, the religiousness of the people and the traditional prestige of the Ulema and the Al-Azhar. Furthermore they took due cognizance of the religious background of the majority of intellectuals and the potential role of Islam

in containing Marxism. However, they made very cautious efforts to neutralize religion as a political force, to mitigate its anti-modernizing effects and to remove obstacles in the way of socio-economic progress. This stance resulted in a very tenuous and fragile policy of balance. An outcome of this policy appeared in anti-feudal and modernizing measures which narrowed the class-base and ideological supremacy of Islam.

Besides land reform, industrialization and social policy, such special measures as nationalization of the real estate properties of Islamic institutions, subordination of religious institutions to the government, separation of civil and religious jurisdiction, campaigns for birth-control and the eradication of illiteracy, enacting of laws to reduce the social subjugation of women, partial secularization of the system of education, establishment of a comprehensive and secular network of mass culture should be underlined here.

However, Egypt did not experience Ataturk style of de-Islamization. Kemal Karpat rightly pointed out that while Ataturk "systematically crushed the political and educational institutions of Islam and tried to transform Islamic political values, forms of loyalty and identity into nationalism... Nasser left Islamic institutions almost intact and built them
gradually in his modernist state". 11 Nasser's government supported the maintenance of a network of Islamic institutions. In the first 12 years of the revolution 1638 new mosques were built with government support. In 1962, 53,000 religious functionaries, Imams, Muezzins, Koran-readers, worked in approximately 17,000 mosques, the standard of their material welfare surpassed that of similar categories in state services. 12 By 1970 the number of mosques reached 20,000. 13 The budget of the Ministry of WAKF was 13.3 million LE in 1969-70, which was 0.55 per cent of the state budget and was equal to the budget of the Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Information. 14

One of the first measures of the revolutionary government was to annul the jurisdiction of the Sharia Courts over civil matters. But the civil courts, declared competent in civil cases continued their jurisdiction according to the laws of Sharia. For example, they permitted birth-control but maintained

polygamy. Since 5 per cent of married men lived in polygamy, this closely effected the situation of women and the birth-rate.

The Ulema and the Al-Azhar lost a part of their former influence; however, they remained important factors in life. Religious leaders, mainly because of their traditional anti-colonial attitude, identified themselves with certain objectives of the revolution. In the 1950s, they issued some very important Fatwas in which they took a firm stand supporting the anti-imperialist policy. The Imams of the mosques usually did not oppose Nasser's modernization programmes in their sermons. Only once in 1962 was there major tension between the clergy and the state when during the National Congress of People's Forces, Al Ghazali, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar openly challenged women's emancipation. Thereafter he was attacked for his stand in the press and public meetings and demonstrations of Muslim students followed. In the same year, during the nation wide discussions on the draft of The Charter, the Ulema succeeded in having Islam declared as the state religion in the final, June 30, 1962 version of the
document. It must be pointed out that this was the only issue on which Nasser was compelled to withdraw. 15

The political relation between Nasser and "official Islam" was characterized by mutual accommodation, understanding and tolerance. Nasser and his colleagues usually began and concluded their articles or public speeches with quotations from the Koran, referred to historic, social and cultural significance of Islam with great respect and left it undisturbed in cultural and moral spheres. Among the priorities of cultural policy of the U.A.R. "the interest of the state in promoting Islamic culture within and outside the country" could also been seen though it was by no means the first in the list. 16 There was a separate ministry which was responsible for the implementation. Priorities of cultural policy included mosques as institutions of mass culture. Radio was also rightly referred to as a channel for transmitting religious culture since its "Holy Koran station", founded in 1964, only transmitted Koran-texts during the entire programme i.e. 12 hours per day. The main radio-programme of Cairo was 11 per cent religious. In the second

15. Be'eri, Ch. 2, n. 37, pp. 258-86.
16. Wahba , Ch. 4, n. 41, pp. 24-25.
half of the 1960s, 50 per cent of the published books could be categorized as religious.  

While political ideology underwent a major transformation, the historical and moral knowledge taught in the institutes of education continued to be based on the values and teachings of Islam. Religion continued to exercise an almost unvarying impact on the thinking and habits of the rural population. In 1969, a sociological survey in a village called El-Marazig, showed that more than three-quarters of the leisure hours of the people were occupied by religious programmes. 

The Muslim clergy reciprocated the government's liberal attitude to religion with political loyalty. This was amply clear in its refraining from overt demonstrations or activities against the regime. Dr. Mohammed M. Al-Fahham, Grand Sheikh and Vice-Chancellor

17. Ibid., pp. 55 and 67.
19. The village had electricity, agro-machinery, drinking water, a medical centre, two schools and a cooperative. 38% of the households had a radio-set each, 14.4% had books and 7% owned paintings. Wahba, Ch. 4, n. 41, pp. 12-13.
of Al-Azhar stated in his introductory address in 1971 at the Sixth Cairo International Conference on Islamic Research, that Cairo was and continues to be the centre of the Muslim World. He stressed the importance of social justice in Islam, its commitment to progress and development and the need for purging Islam of rightism and "doctrinaire political fanaticism". He described Nasser as an outstanding, wise and enlightened leader and founder of the Islamic Academy and upheld the loyalty of the Muslim clergy to the state. The resolution of the Conference condemned the actions of "Israel, supported by colonialism" and called upon "Allah the Omnipotent... to guide the President on the path of Jihad for the restoration of our territorial integrity and self-respect under the banner of Islam". 20

The political relations between the revolutionary government and the Muslim Brotherhood took a totally different shape. The basis of the political compromise between Nasser and the Muslim officialdom was laid by their clinch-down from the position of absolute adherence of their influence and power. Such a compromise with

the Muslim Brotherhood could not last long. The Brotherhood, as already mentioned, had a role in the victory of Free Officers as well as in the consolidation of their power and it wanted to translate this role into power position rather than reducing itself to the position of subculture to be integrated by Nasserism in the national culture and political system of the region.

The history of relations between Nasser's government and the Brotherhood is usually divided into two periods: 1952-54 and 1954-70. In the first period the officers signalled their intention to cooperate by various gestures. They released the "Brothers" imprisoned by the old regime, banned the student movements which attacked the Brotherhood, initiated an official investigation to identify Hassan al-Banpa's murderers and let the Brotherhood continue as a religious organisation even though political parties were banned in January 1953. But the leaders of the Brotherhood, overestimating their strength and influence, demanded a political setup based on Islam and the right to veto in Parliament for themselves. Hassan Hodaibi, one of the most prominent leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood openly
criticised Nasser's land-reform, opposed the setting up of the Liberation Rally and the negotiations and evacuation treaty with the British. He also spoke against the establishment of the Egyptian National Guard which emerged as a counter-force to the armed squads of the Brotherhood. The comprehensive resolution of the Consultative Council of the Brotherhood on September 23, 1954 demanded the right for the Brotherhood to have a say in crucial questions such as the evacuation agreement with the British. The resolution also demanded for the Brotherhood a position of power which would essentially be on par with the Revolutionary Command Council of the Free Officers. However, the resolution acknowledged the positive role of the Free Officers in the liquidation of the monarchy and feudalism and in the opening of the road a new and better society. 21

The Muslim Brotherhood declined the offer of governmental posts and rather adopted open confrontation. When the evacuation agreement was signed with the British, the Brotherhood's spokesman labelled Nasser as traitor. The subsequent ill-fated attempt on Nasser's life led to the execution of six leaders

of the organisation. There is very little data available on the history of the Brotherhood after 1954, when it became illegal. It is, however, well known that after the abortive attempt to assassinate Nasser, the Brotherhood shifted the centre of its activities to other Arab capitals. In their leaflets published in Beirut and Damascus they condemned Nasser's nationalist experiment as the infiltration of foreign atheist doctrines. 22

In the first half of the 1960s, Nasser, to counterbalance the influence of leftist activists who had been then released and given some public positions, granted pardon to thousands of Muslim Brothers and also entrusted a few of their leaders with important posts such as the chief editorial jobs of the journals Al-Thakafa and Al-Risala. These two monthlies sharply criticised "the Bonapartist conquest of Egypt", the acceptance of the "foreign teachings of the corrupt West", "the decline of the Islamic nation" and the

birth control experiments. In the fall of 1965, a conspiracy was discovered, which revealed a nexus between some of the Muslim Brothers with the British Intelligence, CENTO and Saudi Arabia. From among more than 200 arrested, the Supreme Leader Sayyid Kutb and some of his colleagues were executed.

Nasser's significant views on religion can be read in The Charter. But The Charter itself is not a religious document. It mentions Islam only in the fifth place among the social guarantees conferred by the revolution. The sentence referring to Islam in The Charter pronounces: "Unshakable faith in God, His Prophets and His sacred message which He passed to man as a guide to justice and righteousness". There are some more reference in the chapter on the history of the country, to the role of Islam in the struggle for the preservation of Arab civilization and against the Ottoman Caliphate. Here the historic role of the Egyptians is formulated as follows: "In the history of Islam, the Egyptian people guided by


the message of Mohamed, assumed the main role in the defence of civilization and mankind".²⁵ This was the people who bore the brunt of Turkish and Tartar invasions and struggled against European colonialism. Interestingly, the emergence of the anti-colonialist revolutionary spirit is not attributed in The Charter to religion but to the impact of modernist ideas which infiltrated Egypt from Europe. The heroes in history were not the conservative Ulema but religious and political reformers, pioneers of women's liberation struggle in the beginning of the Twentieth century.²⁶

The social role of Islam is more closely scrutinized in another chapter of The Charter, entitled "Production and Society". After pleading for freedom of religious belief, family-planning and women's emancipation, the chapter emphasises the progressive, revolutionary character of religious principles. "All religions contain a message of progress. But the forces of reaction, desiring to monopolise all the goods of the earth and use them to serve their own selfish interests alone, committed the crime of attaching their

²⁵. Ibid., p. 17.
²⁶. Ibid., pp. 21-23.
greed and cupidity to religion and of reading into it something that contradicts its very spirit with the object of stemming the current of progress. No religion can accept a system of class distinction, by which the majority inherit the punishment of poverty, ignorance and disease while a small minority monopolise the regard of all prosperity". 27

Thus in Nasser's thinking religious values mean something good, true and progressive but their positive spirit is spoilt by the political opponents in their own interest. However, The Charter is not based on the positive and eternal values of religion since its key terms are planning, production, technology, science and the atomic age. Nasser resolved this dilemma through a compromise with religious groups. He divided social life into two parts namely material and moral, as the pillars of modernization. "While the organization of development requires, of necessity, material foundations, spiritual and moral incentives are able, alone, to furnish the development with the noblest ideals and most sublime objectives". 28

27. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
28. Ibid., p. 89.
References to reactionary forces misusing religion also appear in other works of Nasser. Nasser took a firm stand against the "Islamic Pact" inspired by Western powers and some Arab monarchies. He stood against the aims of the pact and dubbed it as something "combining religion with politics" or "distorting Muslim unity into military pacts". "We do not reject Muslim cooperation", he stated in his speech in February 1966, "provided it serves the interests of Islam, causes no harm to Arabs and is not a result of secret Anglo-American plans. The Islamic Pact is essentially an imperialist alliance, its objective is to fight against the liberation movements and thwart the social progress of Arab World".29 The Charter reaffirms Egypt's links with the Muslim World. "Our people... believe in the tight spiritual bond connecting it with the Muslim World", they are also closely linked with the progressive nationalist movements of the Arab World and the pan-African and Afro-Asian movements for solidarity.30

In the context of national identity, it would be worthwhile to examine Nasser's efforts to resolve

30. The Charter, pp. 94 and 103.
the contradiction between his concept of socialism and his outlook on religion. Efforts to find common features between Islam and socialism are older than Nasserism. In the history of Arab thought, a number of theoreticians claimed to have discovered in the Koran the archetype of a socialistic concept of society, simplified almost to an abstraction of the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality. Rashid Rida, Ali Al-Wardi, Salama Moussa and their followers suggested that the values of a socialist concept are to be found in Islam.

Such is for example the idea of "Islamic economy", based on Tawheed, and a non-exploiting, non-monopolistic ownership. Other socialist elements are: the just tax-system based on Zakat, prohibition of unlawful profit regarded as usury and prevention of monopoly. The Islamic economy would check concentration of wealth through the laws of inheritance. The significant elements of socialism in Islam are the norms which regard work as the source of wealth, public good and social solidarity. Some of the writers, however, emphasise that these elements per se do not prove the socialist character of Islam. They simply suggest the aspirations to mitigate the sufferings of the masses caused by the impact of market economy or to find an
alternative to capitalism and communism both. 31

In Egypt "Islamic Socialism" appeared first in the writings of Mohammed Al-Ghazali. 32 Later on it was discussed throughout in a book entitled *Islamic Socialism* (Al-Ishterakiya Al-Islam, Cairo, 1960) by Moustafa As-Sebai, an emigre and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and editor of the monthly *Al-Muslimun* published in Damascus between 1955-58. The basic idea of the book is that Marxist socialism is alien to Islam, and genuine socialism is not Marxist or atheistic but Islamic and corresponds to the idea of social justice in Islam. Moustafa As-Sebai traced back Islamic Socialism to five fundamental principles: right to life, political freedom, knowledge, human dignity and property. In his views, private property was an unalienable right of man but it must not be used for suppression and exploitation: wealth should also involve social obligations. The right of inheritance should be guaranteed by the state. Nationalization should extend only to the exploiting capital and implemented only with indemnification. The ownership of land must be limited.


As-Sebai further wrote that the most significant difference between Islamic Socialism and Marxism is that Islamic Socialism recognises private ownership, opposes class-struggle and is based on a solid religious ethos, while the communist thought is not rooted deeply in human soul, is not based on religious conviction. Therefore it can be applied only through violence and in an atmosphere of terror. It impoverishes the rich without enriching the poor.  

In his political ideology, Nasser attempted to harmonize religion with his concept of socialism. Nasser reaffirmed his belief in scientific socialism since it was the right path to progress. But for him scientific socialism was not synonymous with Marxism. His socialism relied on the results of sciences. He spoke on the subject in the National Assembly in 1964: "Some people say that scientific socialism is Marxism and so it is heresy. Sometimes the question about the meaning of the term scientific socialism arises."

Some people say our Arab Socialism is not scientific socialism. This is naturally not true.... If we want a genuine and successful socialism, we must apply it scientifically. Otherwise it would amount to chaos. Our socialism is based on science not on chaos. It is by no means materialist socialism. We have never said that it would be materialist or Marxist. We did not say we were against religion. What we said here also means that our religion is socialist and that in the Middle Ages Islam carried out the first socialist experiment in the world".  

Nasser often stressed that Islam is entirely socialist for it never supported exploitation, or accepted differences between human beings. Islam advocated equality of opportunities and, as such, is not at all contradictory to socialist ideas. However, in the past, the ruling classes tried to use religion for their own interest, "always deceiving the religious Egyptian with his own religion".  

The situation was naturally different in the cultural and educational spheres where religion was

34. "President Nasser's Address in the National Assembly", The Egyptian Gazette, November 13, 1964, pp. 2-3.  
35. Nasser, Ch. 3, n. 8, pp. 20, 113-14 and 154-5.
dominant. Olivier Carre, a French writer examined hundreds of textbooks used in Egyptian schools and concluded that in school education, socialism was taken for Islamic Socialism and never appeared in a secular sense. Islam was projected as filling the ideas of socialism with solidarity, cooperation, democratic principles and historical legitimacy. The textbooks propagated, among other things, the supremacy of Arab Islamic civilization and established a total correspondence between equality, fraternity and liberty and the respective principles of Islam. It gave a religious interpretation of terms like state, political power, citizens's rights and obligations, nation, motherland, war and peace. The entire picture presented in the material suggests that Nasserism, as a revolution with socialist objectives and character, was a realization of the social revolution envisaged in the Koran, and, as a spiritual trend was a successor to the heritage of the modernist Islamic reformism. 36

Nasser declared in 1964: "Having adopted the nationalization and socialist laws of July 1961, August 1963, and March 1964, we have created socialist

democracy. So from the stage of the "Revolution for the people" we switched over to the stage of the "Revolution by the people." The statement was far from being realistic: Article 6 of the Free Officers' programme which envisaged establishing a solid and democratic system, remained essentially unimplemented till the end.

The revolutionary leadership derived its legitimacy from the people but was never in favour of popular movements, especially of the urban proletariat. The Kafr el-Dawar incident a few weeks after the revolution in which nine workers died in clashes with the police illustrates the points. In 1958-60, thousands of leftist workers and intellectuals were imprisoned. The regime crushed popular dissent even in the 1960s. However, suppressive policies were not adopted against political opponents alone. Corruption, extortion and other clandestine activities having a bearing on economic situation were also dealt with ruthlessly. All this was a matter of power structure and personal power.

Nasser remained the unchallenged arbiter of

Egyptian destiny from 1954 till his death. His power rested on four pillars: revolutionary programme, support of the Army, international prestige and unique characteristics of personality.

Some Western historians writing on modern history of Egypt tend to attribute the legitimacy of Nasser's power solely or mainly to his charismatic personality. Critics of this position, while recognizing the significance of Nasser's popularity, deny the applicability of Max Weber's comprehensive concept of charisma to Nasser's Egypt. Naturally, one should keep in view the difficulties of a mechanical application of Weber's theory of charisma. However, Nasser's presidential power system embodied all the three components of Weber's typology of legitimacy: the legal-rational, the traditional and the charismatic.

The legal fundamentals of Nasser's presidential power can already be seen in the 1956 basic laws.


However, they appear in the Constitution of March 1964 in a more developed form. The Constitution of 1964 invested the head of state with almost full legislative and executive powers. His special rights included to appoint and dismiss Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers, members of Government and a certain number of MPs. He also enjoyed the right to introduce Acts, to veto, to approve general political line. The President could be re-elected and had no fixed term. He presided over all important state and political bodies.41

Nasser had exceptional qualities of a leader. He was an outstanding strategist and organizer, a hero of the war of liberation, an impressive orator, an informal, convincing and handsome man, incarnating the Arab male idol. But these qualities by themselves do no explain the mythic, massive popularity and solidarity which surrounded him for almost two decades and served him with elementary force in critical situation. Nor is it explained by populist demagogy alone that sometimes characterized his political moves.

Among the objective mainsprings of the phenomenon, the American Hrair Dekmeijan quoted the anti-imperialist, nationalist policy by which Nasser became the symbol of national liberation struggle, sovereign national will and the Egyptian and Arab nation. In him materialized the hopes of the masses for a united, independent and strong Arab nation. However, it would be erroneous to underplay the role of economic factor described by Dekmeijan as "too Marxist". As a result of anti-feudal and social measures restricting big capital the situation of masses improved or at least did not deteriorate further. The Nasserite socio-political initiatives partly realized what the slogans had promised: a better and more just society. For the masses of Fellahs, the above measures easily metamorphosed into a sort of religious devotion to the leader. It is very characteristic that the mass enthusiasm for Nasser reached euphoric proportions immediately after the June 1967 defeat.

The personality cult that grew around Nasser was one of the determining factors in Egyptian and Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s. The particular features of the postcolonial societies promoted the personality cult which is an ambivalent phenomenon
and is not positive in the final analysis, even if the
given personality is positive in other respects.
Nasser was an outstanding figure of the Egyptian
national movement and the Arab World. His activities
were marked by positive elements. However, the fact
that he appeared as a charismatic leader, meant at the
same time that he was above classes, a father figure,
who decided and directed from above. Nasser's person­
ality cult was concomitant with aversion to the political
activity of the masses and with underestimation of
their role in history, and the ultimate curtailment
of democracy and legality. His personal charisma was
effective in the sense that it empowered him to resist
restoration attempts after 1967. However, his policy,
lacking a democratic base, could not survive despite
his charismatic personality and the fact that his
funeral turned into one of the most populous demons­
stration of history, in his support.

In the absence of democratic institutions and
strong popular movement the role of the army had been
decisive from the very beginning. The social sensiti­
vity of the military intellectuals had grown remarkably
in the semi colonial era. More and more officers,
mainly the younger ones who were not integrated into
the dependent capitalism, rejected colonialism and embraced patriotic and revolutionary ideas.

After independence, the army became one of the main components of the structure of state. The reason was the relative underdevelopment of class-structure and weakness of other political structures.

Nasser considered the army as the most organized force of the nation capable of leadership. He wrote in *The Philosophy of the Revolution*: "I have all my life been a believer in solidiery.... We were the bugbear with which the despot disturbed the people's dreams. Was it not high time the bugbear turned to disturb the despot's dreams?" Even the metaphors used in the booklet reflect a military mentality.

The army continued to be depicted as the symbol of the honour of the nation in Nasser's later writings. Its role did not end after the political takeover, but remained a kind of balancing force above the classes, as the only tool of socio-political reforms. In *The Charter*, the national army has been portrayed as a

42. Nasser, Ch. 2, n. 39, p. 18.
43. See, Ibid., pp. 19-20.
strong, modern deterrent to any imperialist and reactionary design.

Nasser for long filled up important posts with his former fellow-officers because of his aversion to any political actors save the army. The supreme body for political direction was the Revolutionary Command Council of the Free Officers till 1956. In fifteen years after the revolution all Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers, the overwhelming majority of ministers, governors, ambassadors, directors of state-run companies and chief editors of the newspapers came from the upper 1000 of the army. 44

Nasser rejected multi-party parliamentarism identifying it with the corrupt party system in the pre-revolution period. He, therefore, banned all parties in 1952-53, and the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954. His attitude to political parties remained negative till the end. "There will be no parties", he stated in one of his interviews in 1960. "With regard to parties in our country and in the entire region, my position is that some of them would collaborate with colonizing

44. Be'eri, Ch. 2., n. 37, p. 429.
powers... others would receive aid and money from the Communists". 45 He rejected parliamentarism also on account of the ignorance of the masses who lacked the requisite cultural level for democratic practice, for they had been suppressed for centuries. 46

The Free Officers had a particular aversion to the Communists, who, inspite of their weaknesses, established certain traditions in Egypt and were, at least potentially, able to offer the people a mobilising ideology and a social alternative. After the anti-communist campaigns and the merging of the communists in the Arab Socialist Union, no organised communist force remained in the country. This continued to be so despite the appointment of a few communists to leading economic, planning and media posts. The position of the leadership in this regard was later summed up by Heikal thus: "There is no place for communists in the Arab World due to basic ideological differences". 47

The army and its upper officer's elite fulfilled

45. Nasser's interview to the West German Press, on January 26, 1960, Ch. 3, n. 28, p. 132.
46. Ibid., p. 137.
Nasser's expectations. The political ambiguities of Nasserism, however, also afflicted the army. Among the high-ranking officers, those of upper origin and Western education constituted the majority, those who graduated in the Soviet Union came home with negative experience of conditions of life and the unusually hard methods of drill. The Egyptian army was a mercenary-styled army and its higher-ranking officers enjoyed remarkable privileges even after the revolution. Many of them were apprehensive of those privileges in view of the increasingly radical popular demands. These features of the Egyptian Army may help explain why it stood idle during the coup of May 15, 1971, though among the ranks, cadres loyal to Nasserism were still in majority.

During the struggle against the conservative forces in 1952-54, Nasser and his fellow-leaders came to the conclusion that for the implementation of their objectives they would need conscious participation of the masses, more broad-based than the army. Nasser attributed his victory in this struggle chiefly to his ability to cooperate with workers' organizations. However, neither the shortlived Liberation Rally (Hayyat al-Tahrir) nor its successor, the National Union (Ittihad al-Qaumiyya) founded in 1957, were successful.
In his speech in February 1960, Nasser described the National Union as an organization which "represents the whole people of the U.A.R. and embodies the democratic structure established by the people". But after four years, he had to confess that "the National Union, in Egypt and Syria alike, comprises a total mixture of progressive and reactionary elements, socialists and representatives of the former ruling classes". He continued: "In the National Union the former landlord and the new land-owner peasants were equally present; the Union had no solid foundation of its own".

The Arab Socialist Union (Ittihad al-Ishterakiyya) was founded in 1962. Its task, fixed by The Charter, was to provide the arena for the political activity of the masses. Its constitution, the A.S.U. Statutes, was laid down by the 1961 Congress of People's Forces. In the Constitution, the A.S.U. is described as a socialist vanguard which leads the people, expresses their will, directs the national action and exercises


an efficient control over the implementation of the principles of The Charter. Its aim is to create a healthy democracy which represents the people in the interests of the people. The statutes do not explain or define the term healthy democracy. However, they state that the A.S.U. organizations form "the unity of people's forces, peasants, workers, soldiers, the educated strata and national capitalism". The document prescribes the requirement of 50 per cent worker-peasant representation in each and every popular and political body, collective leadership, criticism, self-criticism, respect for majority-rule, principle of persuasion, necessity of gaining the confidence of the population, organizational discipline and finally the socialization of certain governmental functions and spheres of authority. 50

Towards the end of the 1960s, the Arab Socialist Union became a huge and diffuse mass organization, incapable of mobilization since, according to its statutes, any Egyptian citizen over 18 years of age could become its member provided he had the right to vote, was a good citizen, not an opportunist, had not

previously been sentenced in a case of honour, was true to the basic principles of The Charter and was willing to work actively for their implementation.\textsuperscript{51}

The A.S.U., despite Nasser's declarations and intentions, almost totally preserved the heterogeneity of its predecessor, the National Union.\textsuperscript{52} On account of this the organization was not able to become a socialist vanguard. Although it assisted the leadership in involving certain sections of the working class in the political processes, and issued a number of important statements and documents, it proved to be inaffectual during the 1967 and the May 1971 crises. Till the end of the Nasser era, it functioned as an organizational framework for cooperation between the workers and groups of the national bourgeoisie committed to the revolution.

In the middle of the 1960s Nasser came to believe in the mobilization of the masses. In a speech he said: "The political activity alone makes it possible for us to face the challenge of reaction and imperialism

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 340.

\textsuperscript{52} For data, see Leonard Binder, In a Moment of Enthusiasm: Political Power and the Second Stratum in Egypt (Chicago, 1978), pp. 320-21.
and to carry out the transition from capitalism to socialism. The government can do this and that by administrative means, but without the political action and consciousness of the masses, without the alliance of the forces of the working classes, we will have to face paradoxes.\(^5\) He clearly saw the diffusion inherent in a mass organization of almost 10 million people. But to the question, he raised: "Why is the A.S.U. membership so large?" he gave an apologetic reply: "Because ten years after the revolution, popular support is still unlimited and it was impossible to reject the applications, since those rejected could have joined the Communists or the reactionaries. We have formed such a political organization which comprises the entire people except those detained and the reactionaries. Later we even admit them if they prove to be true to the Constitution and to the objectives of the socialist revolution."\(^5\) This passage clearly shows that in Nasser's view the ineffectiveness of the A.S.U. as a political problem was minor as compared to the supreme evil, the reactionaries or the communists.


54. Ibid.
Nasser's need to maintain a national unity organization and his aversion to the communists prevented the formation of a genuine leftist party. In the contrary, Nasser, in the beginning of the 1960s, decided to form a numerically small, mobile vanguard inside the A.S.U. In the spring of 1965, he stressed that there will be no need for parties in the future, not even for new, progressive parties, but "...revolutionary and socialist forces have to be put in the political frame, i.e. they have to be given political colour within the A.S.U." The organization of the vanguard received a fresh impetus from the political polarization after the June 1967 defeat. However, because of its secret character, there is very little information available about its size and activities. Leading politicians described the organization as a "socialist party", "revolutionary vanguard", and most often as the "political apparatus" ("Jihaz as-Siyasiyya") of the A.S.U. The secret vanguard did not fulfil the hopes which underlay its creation and instead of activating the masses of the A.S.U. it became mainly the field of inner struggle.

55. Ibid.
During 1968, Nasser, balancing between the right wing, which advocated political pluralism and the left, which pleaded for purging the A.S.U. to transform it into a disciplinised cadre party, made a renewed effort to reorganize the Union. In the March 30 programme he indicated that the main task of the revolutionary vanguard was bridging the gap between the classes. Nasser also suggested the setting up of an elected Central Committee and Executive Committee and to ensure basic political freedom. But those re-organized leading bodies continued to be ridden with the spirit of factional struggle between different power-groups or as Sadat termed them later, centres of power.

As Leonard Binder proved the 1968 A.S.U. elections resulted in some changes in the composition of local committees of the A.S.U. However, in the district and village commissions, local notables continued to occupy 30-40 per cent of the seats; one quarter of local and central bodies and more than 60 per cent of MPs elected from A.S.U. lists in January 1969 had already served in 1959 as functionaries of the National Union.

The 1968 re-organisation affected also the "Socialist vanguard". Nasser curtailed the powers of

56. Ch. 3, n. 54, p. 4.
the secret organization. However, he did not dissolve it because he saw in it a means of exercising control on leftist activities. The secret vanguard along with full-time party work were abolished by Sadat in May 1971.