

Islamic Response to Neo-Colonialism: The Role of the 'Ulama' in Egypt (1849-70)

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- a) Neo-Colonialism and Bankruptcy
 - a.1) **The Settings**

Muhammad 'Ali, the Pasha of Egypt (1805-48) and the man of ambition on his way to building the Egyptian empire and emerging as a formidable power was cut to size by the Super Powers adopting the usual diplomatic tactics of the age. Consequently he had at last fallen into real senility and 1847 onwards the administration of the pashalik (Egypt) was virtually in the hands of his eldest son, Ibrahim (d. 1848) who held the office formally in 1848 (June to November). Finally Muhammad 'Ali resigned the control of affairs not to Ibrahim, whose state of health had rendered him incapable, but to 'Abbas, his grandon by Tusun.

'Abbas I, the Pasha of Egypt (1848-54), despised the European procedure and progress. He had seen the blow that Egypt had received at the hands of the Western powers. He dreaded Christian influence upon Egypt. "My grand-father", he was accustomed to say, "thought of himself an autocrat. He was one to his

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subjects and to his children; but to the consuls of Europe he was no more than a shoe. If I too must submit to someone, let me be then the servant of the Caliph, and not of the Christian whom I hate".¹ He did not invite the assistance of Europeans in the business of the state. He had realised how these assistants and friends would tend eventually to be merciless masters, affect the culture, subdue the economy and control the polity. He appeared ignoble and discourteous by keeping aloof from foreign consuls-general etc., yet Egypt was saved from foreign pillage under his reign—a contrast to the days of his successors, Sa' id (1854-63) and Isma' il (1863-79), who prided themselves on the adoption of an opposite policy and invited the European neo-colonisers. Most Egyptians welcomed the campaign of 'Abbas against foreigners; but it was conducted for his ends and exploited by the landed gentry who oppressed and flogged their peasants at will. So the common people rejoiced when 'Abbas was strangled to death in 1854 by his own Mamluk bodyguard.

However, Muhammad 'Ali's successors had neither his experience nor his energy. Sa' id and Isma' il in particular plunged the country into debt because of their mismanagement and extravagance. Isma' il (1863-79) contracted recklessly foreign loans, thereby paving the way for foreign intervention. He was compelled to nominate two Controllers-General, British and French, to supervise Egyptian revenues and expenditure respectively as Financial Controllers.

a.2) The Suez Canal

A canal from the Red sea by way of Wadi Tumulat, along what is now the Isma' ili Canal, was dug and used in ancient times. It had been in disuse for a considerable period later and was re-dug by Ptolemy I in the third century B.C. and again by 'Amr ibn 'As (r.a) in the 7th century A.D. By the time of Fatimis (10th Century) it was silted and had been forgotten. With the French ambition in the East and the invasion of Egypt (1798), interest in this canal developed.

Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (d. 1849) opposed the plan of Suez Canal, realising well its strategic importance and the possible politico-economic consequences. 'Abbas Pasha (r. 1848-54), though otherwise unlike his predecessor and

grandfather, too opposed the move. His uncle and successor Sa'id (r.1854-63) in his youth had formed a friendship with Ferdinand de Lesseps, son of the French Political Agent in Egypt. This French engineer and entrepreneur, working on the friendship of the Pasha seduced him into giving a promise for a broad concession to construct the Suez Canal. Within four months after his accession the Pasha made this grant. "Persecuted by De Lesseps, who chased him by rail and river up and down the country, [he] at last surrendered and granted the charter in January 1856."² Owing to English opposition the concession was not ratified by the Porte till two years later and actual digging started in 1859.

Sa'id Pasha fallen into extravagance had acquired a taste for spending, which the revenues of Egypt could not satisfy and to meet the deficiency he commenced the public debt and had recourse to the money-lenders of Europe. He granted concession to the Eastern Telegraph Company, a foreign concern and also allowed the establishment of the Bank of Egypt. "He borrowed extravagantly on the security of Egypt, in 1858, in 1861 and in the following year. Then the death intervened and the succession passed to Isma'il."³

'Abbas had given the British the Cairo-Alexandria railway concession which Muhammad 'Ali had resolutely opposed, and Sa'id allowed British troops to use the overland route from Alexandria to Cairo on their way to combat India's war of independence (1857). But there was no more disastrous and ill-timed act for Egypt than Sa'id's concession to Ferdinand de Lesseps for the Suez Canal. It granted for ninety nine years a lease of valuable land and all mines found on it. It also included the right to use forced labour for four-fifths of the work.

Isma'il (r. 1863-69) accepted the commitments concerning the canal, and by 1866 the British no longer opposed it. Under pressure from the French Emperor, Napoleon III, the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Caliphate gave its authorisation. Isma'il paid an indemnity for not supplying forced labour and the construction proceeded rapidly.

I) The Opening of the Suez: An Extravaganza-Celebration

The completion of the work on the Suez Canal in 1869 marked the crowning

point of Khedive Isma'il's reign. He wished that the entire universe should be a witness to the glory which the genius of France had shed on his country without realising that it was the beginning of his decline. The Paris-educated Khedive was sowing the seeds of Egypt's ruin. He was selling its freedom. He brought together, from every clime, thousands of important personages to witness the opening of the Canal, and to take part in the fantastic fetes which he had organised. All the Powers of Europe were officially represented by members of the royal families or special envoys. The four thousand guests took part at Cairo and Isma'iliyah in uninterrupted fetes, banquets, balls, operas, fireworks and gala performance on the most lavish and reckless scale. The guests had to spend nothing, Isma'il spent £ 1,000,000 on these opening ceremonies which were not only economically and politically but even culturally and socially detrimental and abhorrent to the Egyptians. The megalomaniac Pasha Khedive Isma'il boasted that "Egypt was henceforth a part of Europe and not of Africa, the fallacy of the epigram lurking in the fact that, while each portion of the former continent belongs to its own people, the Muslim fellaheen were treated as children of Gibeon, serfs bound to the soil for the benefit of Christian adventurers."⁴

Lesseps turned the document of concession into a bond, and exacted the last drop of blood with his pound of flesh. The canal after all was a European requirement. It was to be a link between the European imperialists and the European colonies in the East. It could not be useful for the neo-colonised and over-exploited Egypt. Isma'il and Egypt did not benefit from it. The cost of the canal to Sa'id and Isma'il was estimated at £ 11,500,000, for which Egypt received no return. To a considerable extent this was because Isma'il was a spendthrift and impractical. Volcanic popular discontent was emerging to erupt at proper time. There was a lull but it spoke of an approaching storm.

a.2.ii) Isma'il's Prodigality

Though Isma'il did much for the material progress of the country, and spent enormous sums in what in case of Egypt, can in an ironical sense only be termed

“reproductivity public works”, such as roads, bridges, canals, railways, etc., yet he may be said to have done more harm to his country than any sovereign since the age of the Ptolemies. His prodigality was proverbial, and the fact that the public debt on his accession (1863) was three million, and by the end of his reign (1869) had increased nearly thirty fold, “speaks volumes for the unfitness of Isma’il to continue as the sovereign of a country in the last throes of financial embarrassment, and on the verge of bankruptcy.”⁵ World money markets regarded Egypt as one of the most promising fields, for not only did it appear to offer a promising picture but it gave investors, under their capitulatory rights, greater privileges than they could get at home. Not subject to the law of the land or Shariah, these non-Muslim Europeans in Egypt were placed under the jurisdiction of their consuls. The incurring of the foreign loans became the keystone to the European domination in Muslim Egypt. Hans Kohn rightly observes, “here, as with other oriental powers, financial dependence led to political dependence and the loss of the country’s independence”.⁶

a.2.iii) Isma‘il’s Failures, Achievements and the Impact of Suez

The construction of the Suez Canal and the consequent bankruptcy of Egypt, coupled with the Super-Powers’ rivalry over it, led to the internationalisation of Egypt and the creation of the Egyptian Question. There were efforts to “slicing Egypt off Ottoman Empire, a kind of furrow in which progress could be sown”.⁷ The successors of Muhammad Ali did not use their judgement on behalf of the people and surrendered their rights to the Western Imperialistic adventurers. The country “once thrown open, the foreign invasion annually increased, and greater pressure was exercised upon the ruler who became like a man trying to keep his feet against a rising tide”⁸ The Christian adventurers victimised the Muslims of Egypt, “not shooting them down, it is true, nevertheless cruelly wronging them by the abuse of privileges and capitulations”⁹ The army of concessionaries during the reign of Isma‘il particularly misused this immunity from the jurisdiction of the local

courts of justice. The consular-courts, the only jurisdiction to which foreigners were subject, naturally favoured the foreign claimant.

The social and cultural impact of the worst vices of the West, coupled with Isma'il's example of prodigality, love of European ways and grandiose manners, went a long way towards Europeanising the aristocracy. They preferred European dress and habits. The new luxuries brought about a type of sociocultural revolution even in rural Egypt.

Due to American Civil War (1863-65) and abolition of slavery there, the Egyptian cotton exports with no competition rose considerably from 1862 to 1864. War being over, it failed to compete and the exports fell considerably by 1866. Needs had increased and the gloom followed. Expenses should have been cut down but none was ready. The taxpayers' difficulty started, lands had to be sold to Greek usurers, the roaming bankers thriving among the fallahin. Consumerism sets in and the period of "bleeding" the fallahin begins. Isma'il takes to sugar cultivation and developing sugar industry, foreign engineers and directors are employed. Here also failure is met leading to exorbitant, heavy and strange taxes, e.g., salt-tax and window-tax.¹⁰

Under Isma'il a short period of prosperity was thus witnessed. An amount of mental and political freedom attracted many Syrian emigrants. A particular type of revival in science, literature and politics is discerned. The printing press was set in motion again. The Egyptian *nahda* (renaissance) was taking its roots. The ground was prepared to receive al-Afghani's movement (1871-79) and Urabi's revolution (1882).

a.2.iv) End of Isma'il's Reign

Isma'il Pasha in 1866 won from the Ottoman Caliphate title of Khedive and recognition of the succession to the Egyptian pashalik by the law of primogeniture. In 1869 he visited the capitals of Europe where he was received, entertained and decorated by the crowned heads of Europe. He was, however, rapidly falling into the clutches of unscrupulous European moneylenders and bankers. His debts had

increased out of proportion. He flogged the fallahin to increase taxes and sought new sources of income for new extravagances. When he ceased payment of his bills and debts, the end was inevitable. In 1879 England and France obtained Porte's deposition of Isma'il in favour of his son Tawfiq. His career is the story of a megalomaniac, his end the fate of all spendthrifts. Deposed and exiled he died in 1895 heart-broken far from Egypt.

b) The Role of 'Ulama'

The period of Abbas (1848-54) and Sa'id (1854-63), the two immediate successors of Muhhammad Ali Pasha, is that of stagnation in every field. It is followed by a chequered period of Isma'il, the Pasha (1863) and then Khedive (1866-79), — an epoch of decline followed by resentment, resistance and finally revolt (1880) by the Egyptian populace under their time-tested and revered leaders, the 'ulama', against internal decline, despotism and foreign encroachment. The movement was dormant during the period under study (1848-70). It was a lull before the storm that was visible later under al-Afghani and 'Urabi.

Al-Azhar, the citadel of 'ulama', a distinct religious corporation officially recognised by the government, played its role as usual. The three chief 'ulama', during the period were the Shaykh al-Islam (The Grand Mufti), the Shaykh al-Azhar (the Rector of al-Azhar) and the Grand Qadi. The Shaikh al-Islam, appointed by the Khedive, was the chief law-doctor of the country with a duty to pronounce fatwa (legal opinion) on any doubtful points or questions related to the Shariah (the Sacred Law). His authority could hardly be ignored by the rulers. The Shaykh al-Azhar exercised a certain degree of control in socio-political matters over those of the 'ulama' who lectured in the masajid (mosques) and occupied a position in the world of learning. His influence over his students, both past and present, was vastly greater than that of his counter-parts (University-rectors) in Europe. The Grand Qadi, appointed by the Ottoman Caliph, pronounced final judgement on all subjects which came within the domain of Islamic Law. 'Ulama', the patriarchs of Islam were the most striking feature in Egypt during the period and they wielded a

powerful influence. In the Islamic sense they were exceedingly learned men with profound knowledge of the Qur'an and the Islamic traditions. "The 'ulama' of Cairo are indeed, great gentlemen who no man, Muslim or Christian, Jew or Gentile, can fail to hold in the highest respect"¹¹

These true leaders of the community, the Shaykhs of the Sufi orders and the ulama recognised the "legitimacy" and prescribed obedience to the ruling Muslim authority, as long as it allowed the Shariah "to care for the affairs of Muslims and promote their eternal well-being"¹² The rulers in turn realised and recognized the value of 'ulama as "a tool of government because of their influence on the population and on the manipulation and creation of public opinion, and continued their amicable relationship".¹³

Abbas Pasha (1849-54) a very pious ruler attended the lectures at al-Azhar, especially of Shaykh Ibrahim al-Bajuri (d. 1860), the popular Shaykh al-Azhar (1847-60). But when the Pasha tried to confiscate all land belonging to his predecessor (Muhammad 'Ali), he was firmly opposed by the Mufti Shaykh Muhammad al-Mahdi. Even though he was exiled and threatened with death, the Mufti held his stand and it was Abbas who finally had to give in.¹⁴

Isma'il (1863-79) and his predecessors had governed Egypt despotically for a space of seventy years and he enhanced it by his extravagance, debt-contractions and consequent foreign intervention. The poor fallahin (peasants) were over-taxed and persecuted. The corvee had broken their backbone. Deputations of fallahin poured into Cairo protesting that the country could make no further sacrifice and the 'ulama' declined against the interference of Christians in Muslim affairs.¹⁵

Isma'il felt that it would be more compatible with his own position as a ruler to endeavour to form a theocracy which could lend some dignity to his court. He found a suitable co-operator in Shaykh Mustafa al-Arusi, who was Shaykh al-Azhar (the Rector of al-Azhar) from 1867 to 1870 and appears to have been held in great awe both by students and teachers (*khafathu 'l-mashāyikh wa'l-talaba*).¹⁶ The Shaykh introduced important reforms. He stopped such customs as begging

in streets in which recitations of the Qur'an were used to attract the attention of passersby. He prevented non-qualified teachers from practising in al-Azhar. He was deposed in 1287 A.H. (1870) by the Khedive on the petition of some 'ulama. Some of the other prominent 'ulama' of Isma'il's time included Shaykh Ali al-Laythi (d. 1896), the court-poet, Shaykh Hasan al-Tawil (d. 1899), a famous teacher of logic and mathematics at Dar al-ulum Teachers' College and Shaykh Hasan al-Marsafi (d. 1889), a leading teacher of language and literature at the same college. Marsafi wrote a book entitled *Al-Kilam al-Thaman* (The Eight Words: nation, fatherland, government, justice, tyranny, politics, liberty, education). These representatives of traditions were equally encouraged, patronized and supported in their work by Khedive Isma'il.¹⁷

The political role and standing of the 'ulama' in Egypt (18th and 19th centuries) is better concluded in the words of 'Afaf Lufti al-Sayyid Marsot, a specialist in this subject:

Their political involvement was of only secondary interest, a by-product, so to speak, of their social standing. And though they were the natural leaders of the people, they did not aspire to lead politically, and were never at ease in the exercise of direct power. They saw their role in society as that of governing the governors... Their self-image was that of the preservers of tradition, not of political innovators; tradition had decreed that though they become involved in the power process they neither direct nor lead it save indirectly. Perhaps there remained vestiges of the concept that power corrupts. They could not destroy that image of themselves, hence their limited involvement and the precaution with which they abdicated power as soon as they acquired it. To "obey in authority" has been followed by the 'ulama' to the present day and in return "those in authority" have depended on the 'ulama in many aspects.¹⁸

The role was played by the 'ulama' in an Islamic society oppressed, suppressed, victimised, pillaged and exploited by the Great (Christian) powers of the West, of course, through their local guards and puppets.

The following words of Cameron best sum up the role of the Christian colonisers on their "civilising mission" in Egypt:

We, who call ourselves Christians, cannot but feel ashamed when we learn how during that thirty years [1849-1879] Christian adventurers victimized the Moslems of Egypt, not shooting them down, it is true, but nevertheless cruelly wronging them by the abuse of priviliges and capitualations, by the mysterious processes of Europeon law to which the Orientals were quite unaccustomed. Whatever may be the point of view, a high or a low standared of morality, a love for truth, or a pleasant cynicism in politics, there must be one weight and one measure. We cannot condemn the Egyptian and acquit the Europeans, and if we palliate our own offences we must condone those of Abbas and Said, and even of Isma'il.¹⁹

References and Notes

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