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IN EGYPTIAN
POLITICS
1919–1952**

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Introduction

The modern Egyptian national movement pursued, in spite of all the differences among the political and social groups, two main objectives: independence and the Constitution.

The national movement has not yet received adequate academic research in Egypt, mainly because of the political and social climate under the military regime since 1952. The year can be considered as a dividing line between two distinct periods. Since that time the earlier period has been greatly disparaged, to the extent that the present young generation in Egypt is unacquainted with, and indifferent to, the history of the national movement, especially the period from 1919 to 1952. Because of the scant dispassionate appraisal of those years, that period will be the historical background of this research, when political parties were most active in seeking independence and a constitution. The circumstances of political life in Egypt in that period were influenced by the main power centers, the Royal Palace, the resident representatives of Britain in the country and the political parties themselves.

Among various interesting aspects of those times, the role of the Copts in the Wafd party and their contribution to the national movement will be the focus of this research.

Makram Ebeid, among other leaders, Coptic or Muslim, attracts special interest. His role, as a Copt politician, has been chosen as a case study throughout that period because Ebeid, as an active Coptic element, furnishes a richly illustrative example of the participation of Copts in the Egyptian National Movement. His political activity continued without interruption to cover the whole period, from 1919 to 1952, of parliamentary and constitutional government. Ebeid was the Secretary General of the Wafd, the majority party,

for fifteen years, and began his involvement in the national movement as an intimate associate and follower of Saad Zaghloul Pasha. Ebeid possessed all the classic qualifications and talents of the Egyptian politician of his time. An excellent orator and accomplished writer, he was able to influence public opinion, and displayed great dexterity in the manoeuvres of political life, being considered one of the ablest political tacticians of the period.

Both as a personality and in his political career, Makram Ebeid was the very embodiment of the thought, feelings and ambitions of an individual coming from a minority community, insisting on playing an effective role within the majority. Mainly for those reasons, Ebeid's political career is a reflection of the period of secular liberalism in modern Egypt, which gave the National Movement, particularly during its early years, a special character by including both sections of the Egyptian nation, Copts and Muslims, in the political process and offering a practical solution to religious divisions. Thus, Ebeid was one of the phenomena emerging within the growth of secular liberalism in modern Egypt. Without major changes and radical reform taking place in the political system and social atmosphere since Mohamed Ali, such circumstances yielding a type like Ebeid would not be found.

Ebeid was also the reflection of the spirit engendered by Zaghloul. Such a spirit was characterized by pure Egyptian thought free of any religious undertones, unassociated with any foreign power and conditioned only by the aim of full independence. The spirit of Zaghloul could be described as the creation of a large group of Egyptians, without reference to any common social roots among them, except the belief in a unified Egyptian Nation, seeking independence and democratic rule. The spirit of Zaghloul differs from that of the Watanist thought and the Umma party, as the former was based on the belief in an Islamic nation, and encouraged originally by the Ottoman Caliph, while the latter was the political articulation of the Egyptian elite and the landowners of the middle size property with some of the intellectuals coming from the wealthy families of the countryside. Zaghloul's aspirations strongly attracted the Coptic minority, enabling it, for the first time in Muslim Egypt, to become a positive element in Egyptian public life.

Any concentration on the religious factor in this study is not concerned with theological beliefs, but rather with a lifestyle and a type of culture leading

to a certain structure of thought in their reaction or response to ideas and events as well as in the shaping of the social relations between the individual and the community in the context of power, or in the political process.

Thus this study will deal with several elements and factors some of which are political, others social or religious. This thesis is not a historical survey, but history will provide the background and the selected material for the purposes of the study, which is an attempt to follow Makram Ebeid in his political career. It also seeks to investigate his inner struggle with high ambition, conditioned by certain factors, and to appraise the opportunities that came his way, to enable him to act as the main representative of the Copts in the modern Egyptian National Movement.

It should be remarked here that the social-political atmosphere in Egypt before 1952 was such as to elicit the response of the whole populace to the Wafd's leadership of the national independence movement without any undue inter-denominational friction. Political partnership between Muslims and Copts under the banner of the Wafd offered the opportunity to all groups and factions to express their various ideas through the mechanism of political activity and participation.

This book deals with the question of minorities generally in the Middle East. It takes Egypt as a model for the study with particular reference to Makram Ebeid, being a symbol of the Coptic politician who goes beyond the narrow limitations of party or sectarian politics to become a popular leader on the level of the whole of Egypt, and occupy the post of Secretary-General of the majority party for 15 years on end.

As it deals with the question of Copts in modern Egypt, the book also introduces a unique example of a minority whose roots go deep in Egyptian history. This study also introduces Egypt, the motherland, as a perfect example of tolerance and national unity in which the two main religions are socially integrated in one national fabric.

The book also emphasizes the importance of political participation and democratic development in safeguarding minorities and establishing national unity.



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