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CONFINING POLITICAL DISSENT IN EGYPT
BEFORE 1952

Anthony Gorman

The policing of political activity is a basic technique of the modern state. Governments set boundaries around what is legally acceptable in political word and deed not simply to protect themselves from criticism and attack but also, purportedly at least, to counter the threat that hostile political activism might pose to society at large. In Egypt this conception of political dissidence developed over time. Before 1882, political offenders were most often defined in terms of personal hostility towards the ruler. Thereafter the term “political prisoner” came to be applied to those regarded as antagonistic to the state itself, whether the British-backed administration (1882 to 1919), or, after 1923, the Egyptian state whose law spoke in terms of defending the constitution against the enemies of the social order.

The way in which the penal system addressed these perceived political threats also changed over time. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, exile, capital and corporal punishment were most often employed to punish political dissent. However, during the second half of the century a prison system, developed primarily with ordinary crime in mind, provided obvious potential for dealing with political dissidents, especially with the rise of mass political participation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Though not the only penalty

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employed, imprisonment came to be applied systematically as an instrument for deterring and confining political criticism and activism. By the middle of the twentieth century, political detention had become part of the standard armoury the regime used to defend its position.

The term political prisoner requires some brief discussion. Defined by one scholar as “someone who is incarcerated for his or her beliefs or for peaceful expression or association” (Neier 1995: 352), a political prisoner is necessarily determined by the ideological character and interests of the hegemonic political order. For these reasons, the definition of what constitutes “political” is susceptible to manipulation, misrepresentation and distortion. Governments have long sought to criminalise political acts to avoid giving standing to a particular cause or serving as a basis for criticism of its repressive character. In 1952, for example, after coming to power, the Free Officers announced that all political prisoners would be amnestied except for communists, who had been guilty of a “social crime”, not a political one (Ismael and El-Sa’id 1990: 73). Conversely, some activists (and scholars) have, with considerable justification, claimed that economic or social protests, such as tax revolts, riots and evasion of military service, are also political in the sense that they express dissent with the system (Brown 1990). Political convictions might also mask personal conflicts or quarrels. Despite these important qualifications, the practice of incarceration has clearly been employed to restrict political debate and promote the state’s conception of loyal citizens.

Despite its significance to Egyptian public life, political imprisonment has received surprisingly little attention in the scholarly literature.¹ This chapter focuses on two groups and examines the way the Egyptian state framed the definition of political offences and applied imprisonment to repress political opposition in the period before 1952. The first are political activists, principally nationalists, communists and Muslim Brothers, who bore the brunt of state repression due to their ideological positions towards the state; the second are journalists and other practitioners of free speech who were targets of government censure because of their criticism and sometimes condemnation of government policies and practices. These two groups are neither mutually exclusive in terms of personnel nor distinct in terms of government sensitivities. Quite the contrary, periods of political

¹ However, for two recent contributions see Bakr 2005, Gorman 2007.

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repression in Egypt have invariably been accompanied by a government campaign against critical voices in the press. As a clear embodiment of the coercive power of the emerging modern state, political imprisonment would not just mould public attitudes towards the state but would, ironically, come to nurture the prison as a site of political resistance.

An Expanding Prison System

Our knowledge of political imprisonment in Egypt before 1882 remains sketchy. During the Mamluk period rulers had incarcerated personal enemies at their own pleasure, while preventative detention, such as the taking of hostages to guarantee the behaviour of a Bedouin tribe, is attested in the 1850s but probably was practiced much earlier (Peters 2002: 40). Even during the nineteenth century, rulers may more often have sent political opponents into exile. Sudan served as a place of internal exile (Hill 1959: 87) but certain individuals, such as Ya‘qub Sannu‘ in 1878, were banished from the country entirely.

Although a more definitive assessment of political imprisonment before the British occupation awaits further research, it is clear that the political prisoner was already an established category of inmate in the Egyptian penal system by 1882. The series of prison inspections carried out by the British at the end of that year, listed up to a thousand political prisoners held throughout the country, even if there was some scepticism about the genuine basis of their offence.² During this period of political turbulence, both those accused of “assisting the rebels” and “stirring up public feeling against the Khedive” and the partisans of ‘Urabi were imprisoned as the political fortunes of each group ebbed and flowed.³ The subsequent release of the pro-Khedive elements and the prosecution of the ‘Urabists highlighted the important symbolic role that prisoners could play in legitimating the new political order.

² Further Correspondence respecting the Affairs of Egypt [henceforth FCAE] no. 5, *Parliamentary Papers* [henceforth PP] LXXXIII no. 5 (1883) 5–31 (General Report by Major Chermiside on the Prisons of Lower Egypt, 5 Dec 1882); PP LXXXIII no. 1 (1883) 65 (Dufferin to Granville, 18 Nov 1882).

³ FCAE no. 1, PP LXXXIII (1883) 77–78, Memo, C.W. Wilson, 12 Nov 1882.

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In the period before the First World War, the British authorities reorganised the Egyptian prison system, setting up a Prisons Department within the Ministry of the Interior in 1884 that administered a system of local, central and hard labour prisons with capacity expanded three-fold. Specialised institutions of confinement for youth, women, the insane and habitual offenders, were also established. Although these changes drew significant inspiration from British metropolitan and imperial practice, they accelerated a local process ongoing since the 1820s of moving away from corporal and capital punishment towards incarceration as the chief penalty (Gorman 2007: 103). Increasingly, imprisonment became the primary instrument for dealing with a broad range of social, and in time, political dissension.

Ordinary criminals were the primary clientele of the expanding prison system but in time it offered obvious potential for dealing with political dissent. At the very beginning of the twentieth century only a small number of offences in the penal code might be regarded as political in nature with no more than a handful of inmates serving prison sentences for such crimes in 1904.⁴ However, as the decade progressed the state developed its capability and capacity for dealing with perceived threats to public security. While not specifically targeting political offenders, the Law of Police Supervision passed in 1909 that allowed for the indefinite internment of “notoriously dangerous persons” at the Kharga Oasis was a worrying development.⁵ Against those regarded as politically suspect, and particularly the revitalised Egyptian nationalist movement, the state employed a range of measures including close surveillance, infiltration, censorship and imprisonment.

The clampdown on political action was accompanied by a move against freedom of political expression. Regulation of the press in Egypt was far from new, with licensing procedures, censorship, and the occasional closing down of newspaper titles punctuating relations between the Egyptian government and the fourth estate since at least 1879. In that year Bishara Taqla, co-owner of *al-Abram*, was briefly detained by order of Khedive Isma‘il for publishing an article critical of the authorities (Rizq 1999c). The Publications Law of 1881, Egypt’s first such law, provided for imprisonment as a possible punishment.

⁴ Prisons Department, *Report for the year 1904*, Table VI (articles 150–158, and 169).

⁵ Reports by His Majesty’s Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan, *PP CIII* (1911) 34–36.

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Although shelved for a time after 1894 (with occasional exceptions), the legislation was reinstated and amended as the Press and Publications Law in early 1909 amid growing fears of nationalist agitation (Rizq 2003a; Ayalon 1995: 116). Ominously, the new law reassigned the authority to deal with offences committed by journalists from the court of misdemeanours to the criminal court.

These legal changes signalled the beginning of a campaign against the nationalist press that saw newspapers closed and journalists imprisoned. Ahmad Hilmi was convicted of libelling the Khedive, the first journalist to be imprisoned for such an offence (Rizq 1999a). He was followed by a number of distinguished nationalists given prison sentences for political and press offences: Muhammad Farid, 'Abd al-'Aziz Jawish (on two occasions), and 'Ali Fahmi Kamil (brother of Mustafa Kamil) (Tollefson 1999: 144). The campaign intensified following the outbreak of the First World War and for the next four years a general clampdown on all nationalist activities through detention, surveillance, and banning of newspapers remained in force (Rizq 2002).

Domestic imprisonment was not the only means to remove agitators from the political scene. Resident foreign activists, such as anarchists, were routinely deported, and the far-flung nature of the British Empire meant that imprisonment or exile abroad could also be imposed on Egyptian nationals. Ahmad 'Urabi was exiled to Ceylon and some of his supporters banished to the Sudan after the suppression of the revolt in 1882 (Hill 1959: 163). Later in 1919, British authorities sought to diffuse the clamour for independence by removing Egyptian nationalist leaders, Sa'd Zaghlul, Isma'il Sidqi and others to internment in Malta and again two years later Zaghlul, with another group of comrades, to the Seychelles and Gibraltar (Rizq 1999b). These measures had mixed results. 'Urabi and Muhammad Farid lost political influence in exile while for Sa'd Zaghlul and the Wafd, exile arguably enhanced the popularity of the nationalist cause.

The New National Order

The stalemate between nationwide opposition to continued British rule in Egypt and the British determination to maintain its position was broken, at least for a time, when Britain granted Egypt self-government in 1922. Formalised in the constitution of 1923, the new arrangements reconfigured a domestic political landscape that now became a field of

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contestation between moderate nationalists and the will of the palace, while Britain continued to play a critical and often decisive role in the background.

Now in control of the coercive organs of state, the Egyptian political elite set about the task of upholding the new constitution as it constructed and enforced its own vision of those deserving of its protection and those hostile to the new national order. The first Wafdist government elected in January 1924 was quick to put this conception into action. One of its earliest acts was to secure the release of Egyptians who, in the course of furthering the nationalist cause during the unrest of 1919–1921, had been imprisoned by order of the military courts. The mass release of nationalists provoked enthusiastic public demonstrations in Cairo and Alexandria and once again demonstrated the important legitimising role that prisoners played in a period of political transition.⁶

Yet, just at the time that the government was making political capital out of the liberation of Egyptian nationals, it was readying itself to strike against domestic opposition deemed hostile to the new national order. Communism had already been perceived as a danger by the authorities, fuelled by a press that reported the activities of Bolshevik agents, the circulation of subversive political material and the discovery of bombs.⁷ Following the establishment of the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP) at the end of 1922, the government launched a prosecution against the party leadership in the summer of 1923 before the otherwise detested military courts, since the civil code had no relevant provision for dealing with their alleged offences.⁸ The failure to secure a conviction prompted a change in the law to plug the loophole. Prison terms were now prescribed for those who “excited hatred and contempt for the established order and the government in Egypt”, and who spread “subversive ideas contrary to the fundamental principles of the constitution and advocated the use of violence and intimidation in pursuing these aims.”⁹ Political offences which until recently had been applied to the nationalist opposition to the British occupation, were now cast as inimical to the Egyptian state and social order.

⁶ *Egyptian Gazette* 8–15 February 1924.

⁷ *The Times* 4, 6 July 1921.

⁸ *The Times* 10 June 1924

⁹ *L’Egypte Nouvelle* 12 April 1924, 227.

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In February 1924 the Wafd government resumed the anti-communist campaign following a wave of strikes in Alexandria in which it accused the communists of a central (probably exaggerated) role (Beinin and Lockman 1998: 149). Party leaders including Husni al-'Urabi and Anton Marun were arrested and communist cadres around the country rounded up the following month. Found guilty of inciting workers to commit criminal acts against employers and of spreading "revolutionary ideas contradicting the principles of the constitution", a number of the leaders were sentenced to imprisonment for terms ranging from six months to three years (quoted Ismael and El-Sa'id 1990: 28). Even with the Wafd out of power, the government campaign, described by the international communist press as "white terrorism", was kept up into the next decade (Kokkinos 1927; Ahmed 1925: 44). Communist suspects were routinely arrested, tried and either imprisoned (if Egyptian nationals) or expelled (if foreigners).¹⁰ Charges consistently cited revolutionary literature, subversive ideas, intimidation and violence, and the threat to the constitution. Concerned that the publication of the speeches of defendants might serve as communist propaganda, the court ordered that a trial in January 1926 be heard in camera, a practice continued in later years.¹¹ By the end of the twenties, the ECP had ceased to function as an effective organisation, closed down by a combined strategy of close surveillance and infiltration of communist groups followed by prison sentences and deportation.

Repressing Dissent

The arrest and gaoling of the editor and staff of *al-Hisab*, the communist party newspaper, in 1925 (Ismael and El-Sa'id 1990: 30) made clear how important the government held the connection between political activism and the press to be. Indeed, at the same time as the government was pressing its campaign against the communists it was seeking to tighten the freedom of the press. The press law of 1925 was amended to increase prison sentences, principally for the publishing of false or inaccurate information that could endanger public order, and quickly employed to prosecute a series of opposition newspapers and politicians (Rizq 2000).

¹⁰ "Communists sentenced in Egypt", *The Times* 20 Jan 1926, *Egyptian Gazette* 14 Dec 1931; *Egyptian Gazette* 29 Dec 1932.

¹¹ *Egyptian Gazette* 23 Nov 1932.

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This increasing use of prison sentences as well as financial penalties and closure to muzzle the press and punish criticism of the government picked up momentum over the next decade with the selective application of press laws closely reflecting the interests of those in power (Ayalon 1995: 119–120). Legislation passed under the Sidqi government in the early thirties was used to convict offenders for the use of “expressions that could incite hatred or contempt for the established system of government in Egypt or cast aspersions on its legitimacy or authority” (Rizq 2004b quoting Tawfiq Diab). Among those journalists imprisoned were Salama Musa, and Tawfiq Diab, owner of *al-Jihad*, who was found guilty of defaming parliament in February 1933, the first case of a “freedom of opinion” offence involving a sentence of hard labour. With the Wafd back in government in mid-1936, prison sentences for slandering public officials and for publishing false or fabricated documents with malicious intent were increased. Opponents of the Wafd soon found themselves targeted: Ahmad Husayn, leader of *Misr al-Fatat* (*Young Egypt*) and editor-in-chief of its newspaper, was sentenced to three months’ prison for defaming a judge in June 1937; Fatima al-Yusuf, owner of *Ruz al-Yusuf* and a former Wafdist, was imprisoned for criticising the government; writer Mahmud ‘Abbas al-‘Aqqad served time on two occasions in 1937 for lambasting the Wafd for its attitude towards big business and the constitution. When the Wafd fell from power at the end of the year the tables were turned. The new government of Muhammad Mahmud issued an amnesty to those convicted under the press law and now began to target Wafdist journalists. In the pages of the Wafdist *al-Misri*, one writer asked in protest, “[W]ould the government please explain to us how it is that while hundreds of Wafdist journalists are being dragged before the prosecution, shoved into prison and put on trial, not a single government journalist has been so much as brought in for simple questioning” (Rizq 2005).

By restricting what was permitted in the press, governments sought to manufacture political advantage and curb criticism. Even *suspension* of the press law could be used to advance a political agenda. When the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, stated that Egypt should not have its constitution restored in 1935—a view opposed by all Egyptian political parties—the Egyptian Prime Minister Tawfiq Nasim Pasha announced that the press would be given a free hand to respond to the Hoare’s statement without any repercus-

sions under the press law (Rizq 2004c). This exemption aside, the imprisonment of journalists and those guilty of “crimes of opinion” had become such a regular feature of Egyptian political life that in 1936 the prison regulations were amended to cater for this particular category of inmate.

Pre-Revolutionary Dissent

While Egyptian governments continued to use imprisonment against political activists during the Second World War, the practice took a backseat to the prosecution of the war effort (with the exception of the wartime policy of mass internment of enemy aliens). However, between 1945 and 1952 the conflict between an increasingly impatient nationalist movement and a series of unimaginative governments saw the political fabric in Egypt increasingly fray amidst an atmosphere of political violence and volatility. The massive demonstrations in Cairo in February 1946 signalled the looming confrontation between a government and a political opposition that began to agitate not only for political independence but also for a program of social and economic reform that the traditional political class had failed to deliver.

In July, the Sidqi government took on the left in a more systematic fashion, again targeting activists and the press. Progressive associations and communist fronts were banned, and opposition newspapers and publishing houses closed down (Botman 1988: 64–65). Large numbers of “young revolutionaries” were arrested and detained, many at al-Tur camp in the Sinai (Abdel-Malek 2006). Over the next two years, the government pursued this campaign against its political opponents with vigour. The penal code, again amended to deal with a changing political environment, now singled out “the promoters of revolutionary societies whose aims included the subordination of one social class to another, the overthrow of a social class, or the destruction of the fundamental social or economic principles of the state”. Organisations of “an international character” were singled out for particular attention (Botman 1988: 66). The new law again stressed that these measures were necessary to protect the integrity of the constitution. This was ironic not only because Sidqi himself had presided over the abrogation of the constitution in 1930, but also because, following a practice established by the British practice between 1914 and 1923, Egyptian governments declared martial law on a number of occasions in 1947,

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in May 1948, and again in January 1952, to facilitate state repression without constitutional constraints.¹²

Yet the left was not the only group that sought to challenge the government. The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood had already clashed with authorities in October 1941 when its founder Hasan al-Banna and others were imprisoned after an anti-British demonstration. Although released soon after, the incident marked the beginning of an increasingly fractious relationship between the government and the Society. In the years after 1945, the Muslim Brothers suffered what they regarded as the “great *mibna*” (persecution) at the hands of the state (Mitchell 1993: 34). Events in Palestine in 1948 ramped up political tensions and reached a climax when, after banning the Society, Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi was assassinated at the end of 1948. Al-Banna himself was gunned down two months later. The government response was uncompromising. Thousands of Brothers were detained in camps at al-Tur, Huckstepp and ‘Uyun Musa by the middle of the year and Brotherhood publications were effectively banned (Mitchell 1993: 72, 186). The state repression against those groups regarded as serious challenges to the political and social order—communists, Zionists, Muslim Brothers, and labour activists—would continue into the fifties and serve as one of the reasons for the popular reception of the Free Officers’ coup and the fall of the *Ancien Regime* in July 1952 (Botman 1988: 15; Ismael and el-Sa‘id 1990: 52; Beinín and Lockman 1998: 368).

The Practice of State Coercion

The increasing use of political imprisonment in Egypt was not simply the result of political conflict between opposition and the government but a product of the increasing coercive capability of the state. The police force, specialised security services, and a sophisticated surveillance system supported a justice system empowered to prescribe a range of penalties for political crimes. The prison system played a central role in the application of this regime of force.

Although Egyptian prison regulations in the nineteenth century do not seem to have made any formal distinction between the treatment of ordinary inmates and political prisoners, a convention, not always

¹² This practice of overriding the civil code continues in the present day guise of the Law of the State of Emergency (Kassem 2004: 37).

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observed, held that the latter, as most often men of means and social status, should be given preferential treatment.¹³ The practice was given a certain standing in the prison legislation of 1901 which stipulated that prisoners be treated according to “their accustomed lifestyle”, in effect allowing for preferential treatment of those political prisoners (and others) drawn from middle class backgrounds.

Despite this oblique concession, the proper conditions in which those convicted of political crimes should be held remained an unresolved issue and a regular subject of public dispute. In 1924 the matter came before the public eye during the trials of communist activists. In the Egyptian Chamber of Deputies a debate, dubbed by one journal as “Le Scandale des Prisons”, raged at the manner in which political offenders were being treated as ordinary criminals.¹⁴ Given the public clamour surrounding the release of nationalists detained by the military courts two months earlier, the issue had more than academic interest. The government, for its part, insisted that there was no legal basis for the preferential treatment of political prisoners. Nevertheless, it granted, at least for a time, an improvement in conditions, partly as a result of direct action by the prisoners themselves. Similar public concerns were voiced regarding the treatment of imprisoned journalists. During the 1920s the journalists’ syndicate successfully appealed to the Minister of Interior to treat imprisoned journalists “with compassion” and “as their counterparts were treated in civilised countries”. Journalists were granted privileges such as separate rooms, the right to bring their own bed and have food brought to them by their families, greater visiting rights and exercise privileges, and the right to read the daily press (Rizq 2003b).

This victory did not last. When Tawfiq Diab was imprisoned in 1933, an outcry in the press erupted about the conditions of his confinement. On an issue where altruism met self-interest, *al-Ahram* expressed its profound concerns that:

a journalist and master of the pen, a man of ideas and a leader of public opinion, and a person of refinement and erudition could be treated as an inveterate thief, a bloodthirsty killer or a hardened criminal who cannot be deterred from perpetrating crime and evil (quoted Rizq 2003b).

The government responded by insisting that since Diab had been sentenced to hard labour there could be given no special considera-

¹³ FCAE no. 5, PP LXXXIII (1883), 5–31.

¹⁴ *L’Egypte Nouvelle* 12 April 1924

tion, but conceded after a time and allowed him the use of a lamp and extra blankets.

Formal recognition of the special status of journalists in prison came in the Press law of 1936, which provided for those convicted of press offences to be held in special prisons. In practice, they were more likely held in designated cells. This provision was subsequently incorporated into the 1949 prison law along with a clearer expression that prisoners should be treated according to their “customary way of life, the nature and circumstances of the crime committed, or because of their social situation” (art. 9). Generally speaking, political prisoners enjoyed better conditions than ordinary prisoners, being held in a separate section of the prison and allowed better quality clothes, medical care, and reading materials. This practice had the benefit of avoiding any potential proselytising between ordinary and political prisoners but it stemmed from social attitudes that held a different view of middle class inmates convicted of crimes of opinion. Yet, if social considerations favoured preferential treatment for politicals, changes in the political climate outside could adversely impact on their conditions inside, as happened often during the 1950s (Darwish 2003, Gazis 2003).

The Camps (mu'taqalat)

Prisons were not the only place of confinement for political inmates. From the late 1930s internment or concentration camps (*mu'taqalat*) were established far from urban centres to contain a burgeoning detainee population. In the years during and after the Second World War these camps came to be employed with greater regularity. One reason for this development was the sheer weight of numbers. Always overcrowded, the prison system was simply unable to cope with the great influx of detainees. Muslim Brother inmates alone were estimated to number 4,000 in 1949 (Mitchell 1993: 72). After 1952, the number of prisoners dramatically increased to at least 25,000, accompanied by a significant expansion in the camp system (Domenach 1957).

Internment camps had the advantage not only of greater capacity but of relative invisibility. Prisons for the most part were located in and around population centres. The Central Prison in Cairo, Hadra Prison in Alexandria and provincial prisons were familiar parts of the urban landscape. Even the hard labour prisons of Tura, Abu Za'bal and al-Qanatir (the Barrage) on the outskirts of Cairo were well-

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known locations. Proximity to urban centers facilitated visits by the families of detainees but also increased the danger, as far as the government was concerned, that the plight of inmates would be more apparent and thus more likely to engender popular sympathy. The camps, by contrast, were usually set up in more isolated locations. While Huckstepp was only just outside Heliopolis, al-Tur (a former pilgrimage quarantine station on the Red Sea), ‘Uyun Musa (in the Sinai), and later Wahat (in the Western Desert) were all remote. More inaccessible to visitors, they were less subject to the public gaze.

Prison Resistance and Negotiation

A clear expression of the coercive power of the state, political imprisonment nevertheless also served as a site of resistance and negotiation. Sustained by a set of practices that ranged from passive compliance with prison rules to direct protest and defiance of the authorities, prisoners sought both to ameliorate the conditions of prison life and to nurture a sense of group identity and purpose. Amongst political prisoners the phenomenon and development of prison subculture could take on a more ideological and politically focused sense grounded in an ethic of struggle.

The hunger strike was a favoured protest. Refusal of food only became feasible in Egypt after the state undertook the responsibility to feed inmates at the end of the nineteenth century. In the years before the First World War, ordinary prisoners at Tura and the Barrage regularly employed the tactic to protest against the poor quality of food and their conditions of confinement. Perhaps one of the first hunger strikes of a political character occurred when Muhammad Kamil Husayn, a trade unionist, reportedly refused food in early 1922.¹⁵ The practice was soon taken up by communist inmates who successfully won the right to wear their own clothes, read books and see relatives once a fortnight in 1924 (Ahmed 1925: 44–45). The death of Anton Marun during another hunger strike the next year demonstrated the hazards of such a tactic (A.S. 1926). Nevertheless, the hunger strike remained an effective way of protesting prison conditions particularly when publicised. Journalist Tawfiq Diab (May 1933) and union leader Prince ‘Abbas Halim (July 1934) refused food, although the latter for

¹⁵ *The Times* 26 Jan 1922.

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only three days and from the relative comfort of the foreigners' prison. Nevertheless the tactic, assisted by his high profile, proved successful. By the late 1940s the collective hunger strike had become a well-established part of the political prisoners' stock in trade. In 1949 political detainees at Huckstepp went on hunger strike for better conditions and later a similar action by communists in Cairo Prison won an improvement in their status (Darwish 2003).

Inmates pursued a less dramatic but arguably more effective means of resisting the psychological pressure of imprisonment through collective organization, that is, by taking control of the management of their daily prison routines themselves. Although a regular feature of prison life, the practice was probably strongest among political prisoners whose solidarity provided a solid basis for common agreement and disciplined practice. In Cairo Prison in 1950, for example, communist and other political inmates formed a "General Assembly of Life", which represented members in negotiations with prison authorities and was subsequently adopted by Marxist groups throughout the Egyptian prison system (Darwish 2003). Muslim Brotherhood detainees also organized themselves, if on different, more hierarchical lines.

Internment camps offered greater opportunity for detainees to determine the order of prison life. Camp authorities were often content to maintain external security while inmates, less physically constrained in large sheds or tents (rather than in cells), managed their daily routines. The practice of separating political cadres from ordinary criminals and of segregating different political tendencies reinforced feelings of solidarity. Under these conditions the prison experience could radicalise inmates, as happened to labour activist Mahmud al-'Askari (Beinin and Lockman 1998: 320). Indeed it is ironic that the communist movement in Egypt, forced underground and chronically fragmented during the 1940s and 1950s, was arguably at its most united in prison. On occasion, camp life even allowed for political discussions between communists and Muslim Brothers in the same camp (Botman 1988: 92).¹⁶ As well as reinforcing political identity, prison life could also foster personal development through collective cultural and educational activities, such as providing the opportunity of performing theatre and studying languages and literature.

¹⁶ Yusuf Darwish, a communist inmate, reported discussing socialism with 'Umar Tilmisani, later head of the Muslim Brotherhood, while detained (Personal Interview).

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Despite these positive manifestations of prison subculture, the prison camp as a site of constructive resistance should not be exaggerated. Ideological divisions and personal disagreements within political movements were not expunged by the shared experience of prison (Ismael and el-Sa'id 1990: 66). Moreover, as Voglis (2002) has pointed out, the so-called solidarity of prison life has its own coercive dimension. On a practical level, there is little doubt that for many individuals imprisonment and torture was often a brutal experience that convinced them that political activism was not worth the personal price (Mitchell 1993: 69–70). After 1952, the evidence suggests that prison conditions got significantly worse. Indeed, the decision of the Communist Party to dissolve itself in 1965 was in part due to the toll that years of imprisonment and harsh treatment had taken on the membership (Darwish 2003).

Conclusion

In the century before 1952, political imprisonment closely mirrored the changing conceptions of political dissidence in Egypt and served as a barometer of contemporary sensibilities. As the field of politics expanded, the early nineteenth century notion of the political prisoner as a personal enemy of the ruler gave way to that of the enemy of the state, applied to those accused of subverting the constitution and the social order in the 1920s. Techniques of coercion that had been developed though not necessarily created by the colonial regime were, with Egyptian self-government, embraced by the indigenous elites to deal with those whose actions and expression were deemed to have exceeded acceptable limits. The political prison was central to this strategy as it sought to contain, constrain and confine those who threatened hegemonic social values. When this opposition developed on a mass scale, internment camps were established as part of the carceral regime on an industrial scale.

Despite its increasing use as an instrument of state repression, preventative and punitive political imprisonment had only limited success in the period before 1952. Egyptian nationalists before the First World War were neutralised for a time but would capture the state in the 1920s. The communist movement, ruthlessly suppressed in the 1920s, would again rise as an important oppositional force in the 1940s and influence the trajectory of the 1950s. The banning of the Muslim

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Brotherhood in the late 1940s and imprisonment of thousands of its members would be only one setback in a much longer record of Islamic militancy. Indeed, it might be argued that the government record against the non-parliamentary opposition after 1945 was symptomatic of the decline and ultimate overthrow of the old order. Employed en masse, political imprisonment became counter-productive for a regime already leaking legitimacy and increasingly characterised as repressive in nature. Yet just as political imprisonment became a central instrument for the defence of the regime, so it contributed to the construction of an ethic of political opposition and resistance. With the coup of July 1952, the by now well-established ritual was observed: political prisoners were released, a new campaign of political repression instigated, this time with a greater ferocity, and political imprisonment became more deeply inscribed in Egyptian political practice.

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