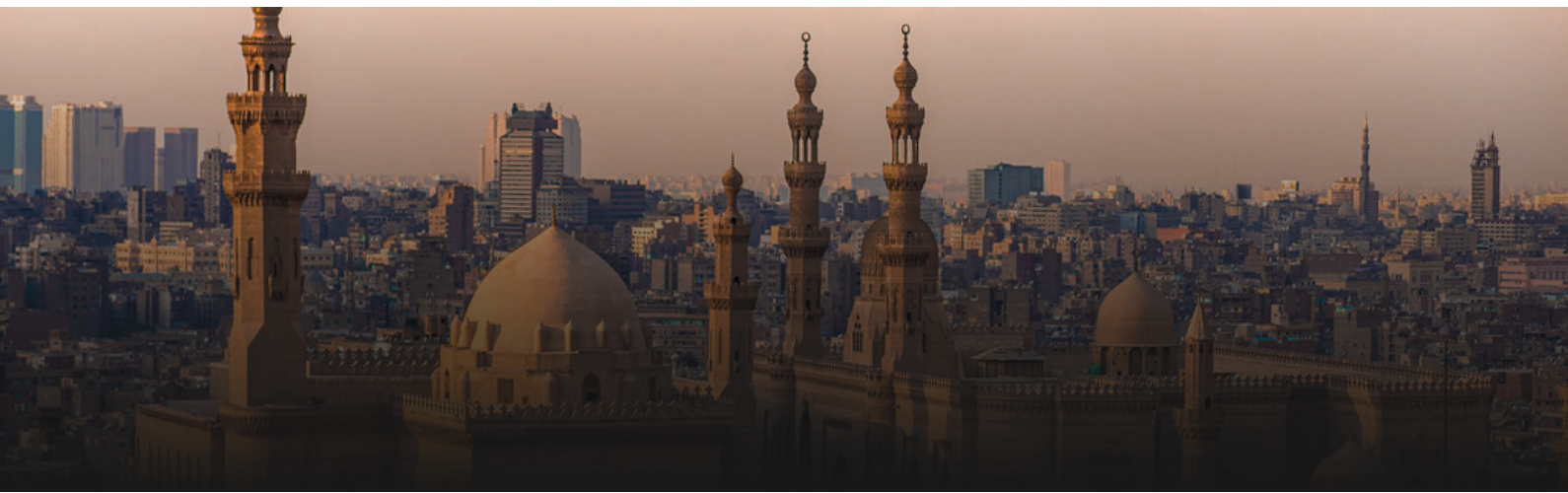


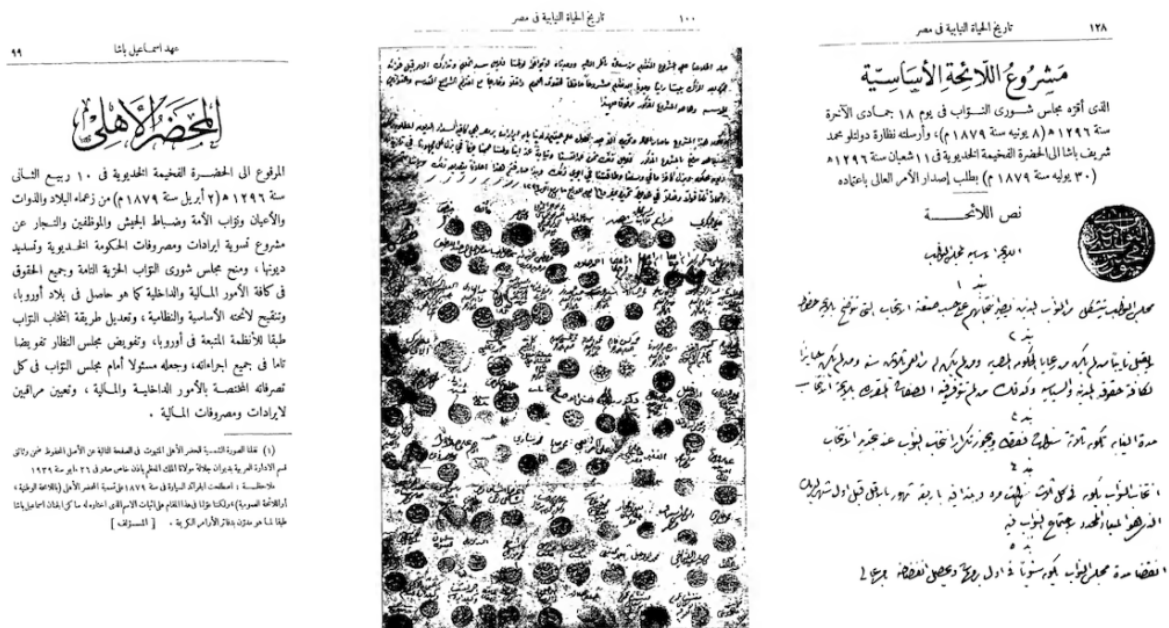


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Democracy's Lost Century: What Egypt's Historical Political Economy Reveals about Middle Eastern Authoritarian Resilience

by Mohamed Saleh



Left: Page 1 of Egypt's national manifesto issued on 2 April 1879. Centre: Page 1 of signatories of the national manifesto. Right: Page 1 of final draft of Egypt's basic law (constitution) issued on 8 June 1879. Source: Subhi (1947).

Democracy has long struggled in the Middle East. Popular explanations blame Islamic culture, oil dependence, hydraulic despotism, or colonial legacies. But this narrative of inevitable authoritarianism overlooks a crucial historical reality: the Middle East had thriving democratic movements dating back to the late 19th century.

My recent research project funded by the British Academy examines Egypt's forgotten democratic experiments through a unique lens – tracking every member of parliament from 1824 to 2020 and parliamentary speeches from 1866–1882 and 1924–1952. What emerges is a story not of democratic impossibility, but of democratic potential that was first disrupted by colonialism and was then lost in the postcolonial period.

Egypt's First Democratic Awakening

Long before the 2011 Arab Spring, Egypt experienced its own democratic awakening. Following the 1860s cotton boom, Egypt developed a prosperous rural middle class – village headmen and medium landowners who **bought slaves** to work their cotton farms. This class dominated Egypt's parliament by design since 1824.

When Egypt defaulted on its foreign debt in 1876, these rural elites **translated** their economic power into demands for *partial* democratisation, that is political power-sharing with the ruling Ottoman-Egyptian landed elite.

During the 'Urabi nationalist revolution, members of parliament (MPs) signed a National Manifesto in 1879 – one of the earliest pro-democratic documents in the Middle East. This manifesto called for a new constitution establishing parliamentary oversight of the executive.

MPs then drafted new laws between 1879 and 1882 that institutionalised parliamentary oversight and expanded voting rights from 3% to 11% of adult males. The Khedive ratified these laws in March 1882.

This wasn't political theater. Analysis of parliamentary speeches from 1866 to 1882 reveals a dramatic shift after 1876. Before the debt crisis, MPs focused on agriculture, land, and labor. Afterward, they pivoted to democratisation topics, extensively discussing constitutional drafts.

Crucially, among rural middle-class MPs, the largest rise in democratic speeches came from cotton-producing provinces where rural middle class held the most economic power relative to the landed elite. These democratic demands were primarily driven by elite conflict over labor, rather than land. Furthermore, MPs from cotton provinces increasingly demanded capitalist, yet protectionist, economic reforms: land privatisation, lower taxes, restrictions on forced labor, and import regulation.

Our findings challenge some of the conventional views in democratisation. Rather than mass-elite conflict, Egypt experienced an intra-elite conflict between an incumbent landed elite and a rising capitalist elite. This contradicts the dominant view that democratisation requires an urban bourgeoisie. Instead, it shows democratisation can occur in agricultural societies if there is a rising capitalist rural middle class.

Colonial Disruption

The 1882 British occupation abruptly ended this democratic experiment. Far from preserving existing institutions, the **British redistributed political power** within Egypt's parliament away from the rural middle class toward the landed elite.

The data reveals extensive colonial political re-engineering. In cotton-producing areas where the rural middle class had been strongest, their share of MPs declined sharply after 1882. Meanwhile, the landed elite's political influence increased under British patronage.

This was strategic. The British needed reliable domestic partners and found them among the landed elite, who shared their interest in political stability and economic extraction through free trade policies. The rural middle class, with their democratic demands and economic nationalism, threatened colonial objectives.

The Postcolonial Paradox

Egypt's 1919 anticolonial revolution led to nominal independence in 1922 and the 1923 constitution establishing of a semi-parliamentary system. But this regime proved fragile. The 1952 Free Officers military coup promised to break the landed elite's power through land redistribution.

The land reform of 1952–1961 did redistribute economic power from the landed elite to the masses. According to **ongoing research**, the land reform created new patterns of political exclusion rather than democratisation.

Before 1952, the parliament featured high turnover of MPs and MP families, yet low entry rates – essentially political musical chairs among the same limited pool. After 1952, areas with more intensive land redistribution saw increased turnover of MPs and families. But old dynastic networks were replaced not by democratic competition, but by new dynasties loyal to the military regime.

These new networks often came from rural middle-class families whose medium-sized landholdings fell below redistribution thresholds. They formed the backbone of the military regime.

This reveals a crucial insight: economic redistribution doesn't automatically translate into political democratisation. Postcolonial regimes broke old elite networks while creating new forms of control.

Rethinking Middle Eastern Exceptionalism

These findings challenge three dominant narratives about Middle Eastern economic and political history.

First, the region isn't culturally incompatible with democracy. Egypt developed indigenous democratic movements paralleling experiences in European agricultural societies like 19th-century

Greece. Similar attempts occurred in the Ottoman Empire, Armenia, and Tunisia.

Second, colonialism didn't preserve traditional institutions but actively reshaped them for imperial interests. The British systematically weakened democratic forces and strengthened compliant elites.

Third, postcolonial land reforms, despite revolutionary rhetoric, often created new authoritarianism rather than genuine democratisation.

The Egyptian case suggests democracy requires not just economic development, but a delicate balance of social forces. When no elite faction can completely dominate others, power-sharing becomes possible. But foreign intervention – whether colonial occupation or Cold War pressures – can disrupt these domestic dynamics. Even without external intervention, elite conflicts may resolve through complete disenfranchisement rather than democratic accommodation.

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