

Introduction

Nasserism as a Form of Populism

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Existing Interpretations of Nasserism

“Egypt gave Nasserism to the Arab world,” wrote Fouad Ajami in his celebrated book, *The Arab Predicament*.¹ We may surmise that Ajami, like many other scholars, did not consider it necessary to define Nasserism, since it has become a term commonly used in Arab and Western parlance. Admittedly, several definitions have been offered in the literature, but they all highlight the fact that the term *Nasserism* has been rather vaguely used and its meaning and components have been inadequately defined.² Thirty years after Nasser’s death, armed with a wider historical perspective, we may organize existing interpretations of Nasserism into five clusters.

The first interpretation views Nasserism as an ideological movement. Although Nasserism was not considered to be as consistent or comprehensive as other ideologies—such as liberalism, socialism, or communism—it was seen as a system of ideas comprising all or some of the following components: anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism (or nationalism), and Arab socialism. All those adhering to these principles, so it is claimed, constituted part of the Nasserite movement. Taking into account the central role that ideologies had played in politics after World War II, the perception of Nasserism as an ideological movement seemed plausible. The main principles of this ideology, it is argued, are included in three documents: Nasser’s *Philosophy of the Revolution*, published in 1953–54, the 1956 constitution, and the National Charter (al-Mithaq al-Watani), published in May 1962; some add the March 1968 Manifesto.³ Nasser’s speeches and interviews are also considered important sources for understanding the Nasserite ideology.

Understandably, proponents of this interpretation may argue on the level of the rigor and cohesiveness of the ideology. Nissim Rejwan, for example, admitted that Nasserism as an ideology “remains far from coherent, self-

complementary, methodical, or consistent.” However, this does not negate the validity of the interpretation, because ideology “is rarely a perfectly defined, coherent, and universally accepted or approved system of values and beliefs.” Consequently, his analysis of Nasserism was guided by four criteria: the ideas concerning its structure, internal processes, and position in the world; the way in which a society views its history; the broad outlook on man, society, and the world; and the values and goals of society.⁴

Walid Khalidi offered a more nuanced version of this interpretation, seeing Nasserism as a psychological phenomenon shared by an entire Arab generation. In his opinion, Nasserism was not an ideological movement *per se* but rather an “attitude of mind” that is “eclectic, empirical, radical, and yet conservative.” The appeal of Nasserism, according to his analysis, lay in the fact that “it has transferred, if only partially, to the Arab world itself, the center of decisions concerning the future of that world.” This development, Khalidi concludes, gave the Arabs a feeling of confidence in themselves and largely counterbalanced the psychological shock of the loss of Palestine.⁵

The second interpretation revolves around the magnetic personality of the Egyptian leader and his style of rule. A salient representative of this attitude is P. J. Vatikiotis, who claimed that Nasserism, “as the term itself implies, was Nasser himself—his vision, style, and approach to power.” In his opinion, Nasserism means an “authoritarian ‘leader state’ with an administrative apparatus for the execution of decisions which, in the absence of a clear ideology or other objective criteria, were taken by the Rayyis: in short, a despotism on the Nile.”⁶ According to this interpretation, shared by several Egyptian intellectuals, Nasser’s charismatic personality, autocratic rule, direct connection with the masses, and use of rhetoric constitute the essence of Nasserism.⁷

The centrality of the giant-leader phenomenon also gave rise to several attempts to apply the Weberian concept of charisma to Nasser.⁸ According to this interpretation, Nasser was considered either a modernizing leader or a patrimonial leader, with a personal and informal style constituting trademarks of his behavior. Naturally, a style of leadership that associates Nasser with modernization signals a break with tradition, the Turkish model of Atatürk being a convincing parallel. In contrast, a patrimonial style of leadership might be regarded as a direct continuation of older Arab or Islamic patterns of rule. Evidently, other interpretations of Nasserism did not neglect this personal dimension, though they did not place it at the center of their argument.⁹

The third interpretation, prevalent among Western social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, perceived Nasserism as a modernization movement and Nasser as a modernizing leader. In general, modernization denotes “an ero-

sion of traditional authority based on ascription, religion, and heredity and the rise of a new legitimacy formula based on secular assumptions.”¹⁰ Egypt was seen as a typical Third World country undergoing a process of decolonization and, under new revolutionary leadership, aspiring to national prosperity through modernization. Thus, Nasserism was perceived as an attempt to transform Egyptian traditional society through the modernization of its economy and society. Nasser was seen as a modern version of Muhammad ‘Ali, who would turn Egypt into a modern nation-state in accordance with the Western model. This approach concentrated on investigating overall economic performance, consumption level, political mobilization, institutionalization, and legitimacy—all considered important elements in the creation of a modern political community. In this connection, Nasser’s use of pan-Arabism and socialism was interpreted not as a manifestation of ideological convictions but rather as a convenient means for achieving modernization.¹¹

The hegemony of the modernization theory was challenged by the Marxist view of Nasserism, which might be regarded as an offshoot of this interpretation (though some would definitely regard it as an independent interpretation). According to the Marxist view, Nasserism was essentially “a product of Egypt’s national struggle against imperialism and dependency.”¹² In addition, it represented a class struggle between the old landowning elite and the new middle class, represented by the army officers. This struggle led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the old elite, resulting in a new stratification of Egyptian society. Yet, owing to the petit bourgeois nature of the leadership, it was claimed, Nasserism created an inherently unstable regime. As such, Nasser was criticized for interrupting an inevitable process of a proletarian revolution.¹³

The fourth interpretation considers Nasserism primarily as a protest movement against Western colonialism and imperialism, which appeared following a significant period of crisis or disorientation. An encyclopedia of the Middle East defined Nasserism as a “general socio-political outlook, marked by substantial protest against the ancient Arab regimes and Western influence in the Middle East, and Israel as a symbol of that influence.”¹⁴ Leonard Binder saw Nasserism as an ideological movement, but he emphasized its tripartite protest nature: against the division of the Arabs into several states; against the existing economic, social, and political structure; and against the polarization in the international system.¹⁵ Similarly, Saad Eddin Ibrahim emphasized Nasser’s leadership qualities in the makeup of Nasserism, but he subordinated this element to wider historical processes: “The history of this area,” he wrote, “is that of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Guided Caliphs, the Saladins, the Muhammad Alis, and the

Nassers. But each of these giants emerged in a society in crisis, confronted a challenge, had a message, and found people disposed to believe in his message and to follow his lead in search of salvation.”¹⁶

Within the boundaries of this interpretation, Shimon Shamir offered a more complex definition, attempting to combine various elements of Nasserism by placing them in wider historical and comparative perspectives. After dismissing the modernization interpretation and discussing the significance of Nasser’s personality and Egypt’s unique geopolitical conditions, Shamir defined Nasserism as “a messianic response of the Arab-Islamic world to ‘the attack of the West,’” emanating from the psychological-cultural crisis that evolved after the first generation of political independence. According to Shamir’s interpretation, Nasserism “expresses itself through a system of beliefs, policy lines and institutions of the ‘revolutionary regime,’ which shares certain characteristics with similar Third World regimes undergoing processes of modernization, and decolonization.”¹⁷ In this last vaguely phrased sentence, Shamir was in fact pointing at the more general and comparative nature of Nasserism, which later would be offered by other scholars. Shamir also incorporated in his definition Khalidi’s interpretation of Nasserism as an “attitude of mind,” stating that its strength was derived from the movement’s ability to attack the core components of the crisis— “the insult and embarrassment” of long subjugation to foreign domination.¹⁸

The fifth and newest interpretation attempts to equate Nasserism with populist leaders and movements, mainly found in Latin America during the first half of the twentieth century. Torcuato Di Tella, a leading expert on Latin America, was the first to suggest, as early as 1965, that Nasserism should be seen as one variant (of four) of populism, termed the “Nasserite” or the “Militarist Reform Parties.” The Nasserist model, however, according to Di Tella, was not found in Latin America because the economic, social, and political conditions differed from those of the Middle East.¹⁹ Among Middle Eastern experts, Morroe Berger was the first to equate Nasserism with populism—perhaps the only one to apply this theory during the Nasserite era. Yet, beyond an insightful division of Middle Eastern regimes into prepopulist and populist, Berger did not elaborate on this model.²⁰

It was only in the late 1970s that other scholars started to refer to Nasserism as a kind of populism. Mark Cooper, for example, spoke of “bureaucratic populism,” which meant that ideologically the regime was defending the individual, politically it was promoting corporatist alliances, and economically it was furthering anticapitalist policies.²¹ Fouad Ajami, for his part, suggested that Nasser’s “implicit ideology” was populism, meaning

that the state “implemented programs that benefited and secured the support of large and influential segments of the Egyptian population.” He added, however, that Nasser’s populism was diffuse: “In striving to appeal to many groups (medium-sized landholders, landless laborers, bureaucrats, industrial workers, students), the state tried to be many things to many groups.”²² Likewise, Raymond Hinnebusch, who focused on Sadat’s “post-populist” regime, attempted to show the nature of the transformation by analyzing the Nasserite “populist” regime. Although Hinnebusch offers a comprehensive analysis of Nasser’s regime, his study does not cover all the aspects of his populism.²³

In the mid-1990s, Nazih Ayubi offered a certain typology of Arab regimes. In his opinion, the “socialist” or “revolutionary” regimes represent a distinct combination of étatist and welfare policies. Since their description as “socialist” suited the needs of domestic elites and the vocabulary of the Cold War, Ayubi preferred the term *populist-corporatist*, which he applied to Nasser’s Egypt as well. In analyzing the nature of this regime, Ayubi relied heavily on Latin American models of populism. Rather than a socialist ideology inspiring institutional arrangements, he asserted, it was actually the political quest for national independence and for state building that led Nasser to adopt socialist programs. Moreover, Nasser adopted a tightly planned economy, including the control of foreign trade, mainly as effective technical devices for achieving the tasks of accelerated economic growth and political control. Ayubi claimed that Arab populist-corporatist leaders were opposed to the old oligarchy associated with colonialism. Beyond that, he concluded, “their alliances and orientations were subject to a great deal of contingent change.”²⁴

Some scholars assert that the term *Nasserism* (al-Nasiriyya) is a Western invention.²⁵ Others suggest that Nasser’s Arab adversaries coined the term.²⁶ Arab intellectuals and politicians have been reluctant to adopt this term for two reasons: First, the supposedly Western origins of the term caused unease among followers of Nasserism, since it was perceived as an anti-imperialist and anti-Western phenomenon. Second, the term seemed to overstate the personal role of Nasser, thus unjustifiably diminishing other important meanings of Nasserism. Gradually, however, the term *al-Nasiriyya* did enter into Arab discourse, appearing in encyclopedias, books, and articles. With the de-Nasserization process gaining momentum in Egypt and the Arab world in the early 1970s, the term became negative and its supporters were politically marginalized. No wonder, therefore, that the study of Nasserism has been unpopular in the Arab world (and, consequently, in the West in general) since that period. Skimming through articles appearing in *Al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabi*, a leading academic journal known for its pan-Arab orien-

tation, clearly indicates that al-Nasiriyya has been treated as a marginal issue.²⁷

Is there an Arab interpretation of Nasserism? A cursory review of Arab literature tends to refute this hypothesis. It seems that all of the interpretations described above are to be found in the Arab literature, with the emphasis on Nasserism as an imprecisely defined ideological movement aimed at struggling against Western imperialism and capitalism. For example, Louis 'Awad, one of Egypt's leading intellectuals, scathingly criticized al-Nasiriyya, which, in his opinion, was based on seven "pillars": the six principles of the Free Officers declared upon assuming power in July 1952, plus the formation of the National Union (later to be replaced by the Arab Socialist Union).²⁸ A conference, held in 2000 by the Arab World Institute in Paris on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Nasser's death, did not offer new insights on Nasserism.²⁹ Evidently, the populist dimension of Nasserism has not been entirely overlooked in the Arab literature.³⁰

In addition to the existence of various academic interpretations of Nasserism, there were also various political perceptions of it. In Israel, for example, a monolithic image of Nasser and Nasserism emerged during the 1950s and 1960s that largely mirrored the Western image. Most of the Israeli decision-making elite, as Elie Podeh shows in chapter 2, saw Nasserism as an expansionist movement bent on conquering and dominating the Arab world and portions of Africa. Such an enterprise entailed, of course, the liquidation of the Jewish state. An oft-repeated analogy was made between Nasser and Hitler and other vicious enemies in the annals of Jewish history. As a result, incoming information was filtered through these images, constituting an important element in the decision-making process.

Thirty years after Nasser's death and the beginning of Sadat's de-Nasserization, it is possible to look at the Nasserite movement less passionately. It is obvious that some of the interpretations offered in the past were rooted in the current political zeitgeist and guided by Western models and theories. It is also clear that the many failures of the Nasserist movement encouraged scholars to abandon the subject, which had attracted so many during the time of Nasser, when Egypt was considered to be a prototype of a modernizing Third World country. Consequently, only a few studies on Nasserism have appeared since the late 1970s.³¹

This chapter attempts to offer a framework combining most, if not all, of the elements appearing in the five interpretations suggested above, while integrating the Egyptian case study with global historical trends. It seems that by seeing Nasserism from a wider perspective, that is, as a form of populism, we might generate a new, or even better, interpretation of this

phenomenon. By elaborating on this approach, we follow the path of several scholars who have pointed in this direction but have not fully developed it.

Populism: The Theoretical Dimension

The term *populism* has been used by many social scientists in a variety of ways, but its definition remains imprecise. As Torcuato Di Tella recently observed, “This term is useful, though somewhat excessively broad in its meaning, as many different fish can be found in that pond.”³² Populism, as a concept, may be applied to a sociopolitical movement, a kind of ideology, a style of leadership, or some combination of these elements.³³ Historically and geographically, populism has appeared mainly in Latin America, but various types of populist movements have also existed in the United States and Russia, as well as in Asian and African countries. Thus Ervand Abrahamian, discussing Khomeini’s form of populism in Iran, offers the following definition:

A predominantly middle-class movement that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric against imperialism, foreign capitalism and the political establishment. In mobilizing the “common man,” populist movements use charismatic figures as well as symbols, imagery and language that have potent value in their popular culture. They promise to raise drastically the standard of living and make their country fully independent of the West . . . in attacking the status quo with radical rhetoric, they intentionally stop short of threatening the petty bourgeoisie and whole principle of private property.³⁴

Since most of the theoretical discussion in the literature focuses on twentieth-century Latin American experience—Peronism in Argentina (1943–55) being one such case—the analysis of Third World populism in general and Nasserism in particular will rely on insights derived from Latin American models. It will become evident, however, that despite the existence of similarities, one may discern important differences between Latin American forms of populism and Nasserism. For the sake of simplicity, the discussion will focus on the conditions for the emergence of populism and three of its major characteristics. Bearing in mind that Nasserism appeared only after the consolidation of a military takeover, the following analysis will not discuss the type of mass populist movements that have brought populist leaders into power (such as the Iranian example).

Conditions Conducive to the Emergence of Populism

Populism is most likely to emerge in a society experiencing the two processes of urbanization and industrialization—a result of rapid modernization. The resultant influx of migrants from the rural countryside to the urban environment, which usually is accompanied by the transition from a traditional to a more modern society, creates stressful socioeconomic conditions. Such drastic changes, according to some sociologists, may lead to a generalized sense of rootlessness and malaise, called “anomie.” In addition to this alienation, migrants feel powerlessness, resentment, and frustration due to low wages and the absence of sufficient employment opportunities, limited access to urban amenities and services, and exclusion from the political process. Moreover, the semifeudal socioeconomic structure guarantees that the status quo, which has benefited the traditional landed elite, will remain unchanged.

Modernization, through industrialization and urbanization, may also lead to alienation of the urban working class and the bourgeoisie. The urban working class becomes antagonized by the massive control of the elite over the means of production, the deteriorating standard of living, and exclusion from the political process. The frustration of the middle class might be even greater, since access to higher forms of education does not guarantee the attainment of better employment and higher income. Economically, the ability of the urban bourgeoisie to play an important role may be circumscribed by the existence of a large foreign business community that controls the local market. Politically, the closed nature of the elite and its domination over the political system ensures that the educated middle class, in contrast to its initial expectations, does not have an important impact on politics. Among the various groups of the middle class, army officers and students may play an active role in attempting to change the status quo. Other segments of the middle class, as well as urban workers and rural migrants, may play a more passive role, but they constitute available masses that can be mobilized at any given time in their shared aim to change the status quo.³⁵

This complex sociopolitical situation creates a convenient hotbed for the emergence of populist leaders, who attempt to give the new masses a sense of belonging and direction, promising to undertake changes that would improve their daily lives. Thus, the domestic tension between developed and backward parts of the same society, such as that which existed in Latin American countries experiencing rapid modernization during the interwar years, constitutes fertile ground for the emergence of populist leaders promising to change the status quo. Indeed, many populist leaders and movements appeared during the decolonization period, when the tension between these developing countries and the more advanced colonizers reached its apex.

Therefore, it appears that a necessary condition for the emergence of populism is “the contact with forces and ideas associated with higher levels of development than those to be found in the society producing the response.”³⁶ The extent to which this tension is crucial in precipitating the appearance of populism depends on three variables: the nature of the political association between the state and the European colonial power; the level of economic dependency on the colonial power; and the extent of cultural similarity between the colonial power and the local society. A major antagonism on all three levels is likely to cause a confrontation between the state and the colonizer, with the subsequent emergence of populist leaders espousing nationalistic platforms. Significantly, some of these variables were absent from the Latin American case, since most of these countries had been liberated from colonialism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, they continued their association with their previous colonial masters. Economically and politically they were linked to the United States, while culturally they were tied to Europe and the Iberian Peninsula.³⁷

Charismatic Leadership and Its Link with the Masses

Socially, populist leaders—either civilians or army officers—have usually come from the middle and upper middle classes. Evidently, all populist leaders have possessed some measure of charisma, forming a direct link with the masses. The Latin American experience suggests that the twentieth century saw the appearance of a breed of “leaders of the people,” modern *caudillos*, who came from a military background and were antagonistic to the upper classes. These leaders also typically play a psychological role by transmitting a kind of “father figure” image to the masses—an aspect that is particularly significant to rural migrants uprooted from their traditional neighborhoods.³⁸

Max Weber defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from the ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, super-human or at least exceptional power or qualities.”³⁹ Based on theoretical and empirical studies, Richard Dekmejian identified four stages in the evolution of charismatic leadership.⁴⁰ The first is the existence of a situation of acute social crisis in society and a breakdown of the existing mechanisms of conflict resolution. This kind of social turmoil is usually accompanied by a political crisis of legitimacy. The second stage is the appearance of an “exemplary personage” endowed with charisma that would initiate a charismatic process. The success of the leader depends on three variables: performance-message, personal qualities, and opportunity to propagate. In relation to the first variable, Dekmejian asserts that the message has to fit the deeply felt needs and expectations of the society, as well as coincide with its cultural ethos. He adds that the leader “may selec-

tively invoke history, myth, and past heroes to reinforce the sanctity of his mission. To capture a mass audience, he propagates the highlights of the message in simple and explicit terms. On the basis of these promises—reinforced by heroic activity—the leader establishes an initial charismatic bond with the masses.”⁴¹

In terms of personal qualities, the charismatic leader is seen as an “outstanding personality, endowed with great dynamism, sensitivity and resourcefulness,” traits that are instrumental in imparting his message to his followers. The opportunity to propagate the leader’s charisma is often obtained only after achieving a position of power, which allows him to skillfully use the mass media. On the basis of the psychological bond formed between the leader and the masses, the third stage involves “a significant change in the subject’s value system.” The final stage in the evolution of charismatic authority is its “routinization”—an attempt to rely on rational means of legitimacy.

The Style of Politics and Mobilization Techniques

The special link forged between populist leaders and the masses—the educated middle class, urban workers, rural migrants, and peasants—facilitates the political mobilization of social groups that had hitherto been largely excluded from politics or left on the periphery. This is made possible by another outcome of modernization—the growth in communication, especially through the press, radio, and television. By using colloquial language and stirring emotions during their speeches, populist charismatic leaders are able to successfully communicate with and mobilize the masses. This rhetoric is typically anti-elitist and anti-imperialist, making frequent references to well-known or newly revived myths and symbols. In this way, populist leaders tend to manipulate their followers in their desire to consolidate their power and strengthen their legitimacy.

Although populist leaders recruit from all socioeconomic strata in an attempt to forge a classless society, they often ignore or exclude some groups, such as the wealthy landed oligarchy that was once associated with the old regime. This populist desire to forge a cross-class coalition is aimed at achieving national integration while providing a wide base of support for the regime. The popular rhetoric, therefore, is naturally focused on such terms as the *people*, the *nation*, *unity*, and *integration*.⁴²

Most Latin American populist leaders have attempted to maintain the existing democratic system in general and the electoral process in particular, despite their largely authoritarian style of politics. Lacking a tradition of some form of democracy, as in Latin America, populist regimes in Asia and Africa have been highly authoritarian, with only a semblance of democratic-

type institutions. This kind of rule is deemed “appropriate” for the success of a process of modernization held from above, which logically necessitates or even dictates a strong kind of leadership and the imposition of tight control.⁴³ Paul Drake, however, offers a more complex explanation:

Both mobilization and institutionalization constituted double-edged swords for populists. Mobilization raised demands, followers, and claims to a share in political power. It provided legitimacy and a social base for carrying through programs once in power. However, it also threatened to outrun populists’ capacity for control and ability to deliver on promises. As mass mobilization gains momentum, it can destabilize populist governments. Institutionalization could cost the movement its protest credentials, its dynamism, and its followers.⁴⁴

Van Niekerk makes a distinction between political mobilization in Latin American countries, where it is conducted through populist movements, and the less developed Afro-Asian countries, where it is conducted through mobilization parties characterized by loose coalition structures.⁴⁵ The formation or expansion of existing trade unions has served as another mechanism for widening the popular base of a given regime, however authoritarian.

In their efforts to mobilize the masses, populist leaders raise the awareness of popular culture, reviving interest in popular forms of music, folklore, cinema, theater, literature, and other expressions associated with the “common” people. In the past, these forms of popular culture were contemptuously rejected by the old elite, which was associated with the alien “high” culture of the colonial regime. Populist regimes also tend to promote organized campaigns aimed at reviving, rediscovering, and rewriting the past by referring to local myths and symbols. At the same time, the activation of popular forms of sports (such as football), once scorned by the old elite as well, has been encouraged by populist regimes. This revival of popular forms of culture and sports, coupled with the self-discovery process, facilitate a synthesis between the basic values of the traditional culture and a desire for modernization.⁴⁶

The Eclectic Use of Ideology

Scholars agree that populism is not a coherent ideology but rather an eclectic amalgam of ideas combined with the aim of attaining independence and national integration. According to Van Niekerk, ideology is not of great importance. Leaders are familiar with current ideologies, which allow them to concoct their own blend. In some cases, it constitutes the real mainspring for political action, but more typically it represents “a pseudo ideology ex-

post-facto.” In short, ideology is “flexible, opportunist and continually subject to changes in political strategy.”⁴⁷ It has been argued that given their multiclass composition, populist movements and leaders could not be anything but eclectic in order to satisfy different, even conflicting, constituencies. This is why the most common term for these programs derives from adding *ism* (or *ismo* in Spanish) to their leaders’ names (e.g., Peronism, Kemalism, Nasserism, Khomeinism, etc.).⁴⁸

Politically, populism is nationalistic, seeking an end to foreign rule in the form of direct colonialism, military bases, formal treaties, or defense organizations. Patriotic sentiments, in Van Niekerk’s view, “are easily extended [beyond the borders] to *Latinismo* and continental nationalism.”⁴⁹ In certain cases, populism may include elements of ethnicity or religious fundamentalism.⁵⁰ Studies on populism have emphasized that populist leaders tend to conceive international and domestic politics through the prism of “conspiracies.” Van Niekerk went so far as to claim, “Populism possesses only a thought diagram that does not extend beyond the conspirational theory of power.” According to this view, the “innocent” masses are victims of certain malicious forces, such as imperialism, capitalism, and other reactionary influences. Thus, populism is largely characterized by its negativism: anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, anti-Semitic, and anti-status quo.

Economically, populism entails “a reformist set of policies tailored to promote development without explosive class conflict. Eschewing unbridled capitalism or socialism, these programs seek national integration.” Often enough, populist leaders devise a diluted version of socialism or some kind of a welfare policy, with an eye toward the urban working class, the peasants, and some elements of the middle class. Naturally, this kind of policy necessitates étatism. While in Latin American populism the state is regarded more as “a protector and an employer, than as the principal promoter of economic development,” in Asian and African countries the state is “the principal agent in the development process, relying heavily on government intervention in economic life.” The outcome of this policy has been the emergence of a “Third Way” between capitalism and communism. By opting for industrialization, populist leaders aim at reducing dependence on the world economy in general and the former colonial power in particular. In parallel, by carrying out various socialist measures, they aim at creating a more egalitarian society, thus broadening the social base of the regime and, consequently, its legitimacy.

Nasserism as a Form of Populism

Several scholars have already noted the similarity between Nasserism and other forms of populism, but none have offered a systematic analysis of

Nasserism as a form of populism.⁵¹ This failure is all the more surprising because the terms *people* (*sha'ab*) and *of the people* or *popular* (*sha'abi*) were frequently used by Nasser, as well as by Egyptian intellectuals, and thus may give some indication of the regime's popular nature. The number of times these terms appeared, for example, in the National Charter convincingly illustrates the centrality of the populist dimension in Nasserism.⁵²

What follows is an attempt to show the relevancy of the populist theory to Nasserism, using, *inter alia*, the various articles in this volume. Without discounting the validity of other possible explanations for the rise and endurance of Nasserism, the main argument presented here is that the political and economic crisis Egypt had been undergoing, both internally and externally, since the end of World War II facilitated the rise of a populist leadership. Embodied in the charismatic personality of Nasser, this leadership astutely employed various techniques of control as well as mechanisms of persuasion and mobilization typifying populist regimes in Latin America and elsewhere. In essence, Nasser's goals did not differ from other developing countries: independence, modernization, and national integration. Still, Nasserism, as a form of populism, had its own unique features resulting from the particular historical and cultural characteristics of Egypt and its place in the Arab-Islamic world.

Roots of Nasserite Populism

The July 1952 Revolution, wrote Hinnebusch, “was a classic case of a Third World movement against imperialism and the delayed dependent development which resulted from it.”⁵³ Politically, Egypt had long been controlled by the Ottomans (since 1517) and the British (formally since 1882). A narrow-based, non-Egyptian, Turco-Circassian elite often served Ottoman and British interests. In addition, Egypt, more than any other Arab territory, was exposed to the uneven cultural confrontation between a domineering West and an insecure Arab-Islamic world, which had commenced with Bonaparte's occupation (1798–1801). Based on religious and ethnic differences, this antagonism served to magnify the acuteness of what has been termed “cultural imperialism” and traumatize the Middle East.⁵⁴

Egypt formally received independence and was admitted to the League of Nations in 1936, but Britain's involvement in Egyptian domestic and foreign affairs remained paramount. In Egyptian eyes, the monarchy and the nationalist Wafd Party have gradually become associated, if somewhat unwarrantedly, with British imperialism, a process that led to their delegitimization and eventual fall. Thus, the coup was not only a rebellion against the regime's Western orientation, its instability, and its inability to avoid the 1942 humiliation (with the British) or the 1948 debacle (with Israel). It was also an attempt to free Egypt from all traces of imperialism. Moreover, it was

a reaction, albeit somewhat unconscious, against the feelings of inferiority, insult, and embarrassment prevalent among Egyptians following a long period of subjugation and confrontation with Western domination. Generally, many Arabs in other neighboring countries shared these anti-Western feelings and therefore were amenable to populist policies. For many Egyptians, however, gaining complete independence and changing the foreign orientation was not enough. There was a need to change the political superstructure as well as the socioeconomic infrastructure.⁵⁵

Prior to the revolution, the Palace and a small, wealthy landowning elite dominated the political system. This elite had consistently blocked the entrance of the ever-growing educated middle class, which could challenge its privileged position. This class, termed *effendiyya*, comprised students, professionals, teachers, civil servants, and businessmen—in short, the bulk of the urban middle class.⁵⁶ The frustration of the middle class stemmed not only from its inability to climb the social ladder and gain greater access to politics but also from the long-standing control by non-Egyptian minorities over many jobs in the private sector. All of these factors contributed to the increasingly violent atmosphere engulfing Egyptian society since the mid-1930s, as well as the gradual spread of pan-Arabism among members of the *effendiyya*.⁵⁷ Most army officers participating in the July Revolution came from this class. Understandably, the coup raised hopes for political and economic changes in favor of the middle class; similar hopes were raised among other deprived sectors of society as well.⁵⁸

Economically, Egypt had been subjected to British colonial rule, which meant direct dependence on the world economy. Until 1952, according to John Waterbury, “Egypt had been a classic example of an export-dependent country whose foreign exchange earnings rose and fell with the sale of raw cotton on international markets.”⁵⁹ This situation had significant social and economic ramifications, as Hinnebusch described:

Western imperialism shaped Egypt to suit its own needs, turning the country into a plantation for Western industry and its landed upper class into *compradors* with a stake in the extroverted economy. Egypt’s agriculture developed but her peasants did not, and land concentration and population growth produced a growing and impoverished landless class. Industrial development was stunted and delayed while business and finance fell into the hands of foreigners.⁶⁰

Predictably, British colonialism encouraged the pace of modernization, resulting in growing urbanization. Between 1937 and 1947, there was massive migration of *fellahin* from the rural areas to the cities, especially to Cairo and Alexandria. According to official Egyptian statistics, this process

continued with almost 1 million migrants arriving in Cairo between 1947 and 1960, and another 700,000 arriving between 1960 and 1970. More than half of these migrants came from rural areas.⁶¹ Janet Abu-Lughod estimated that by 1960 the number of rural migrants was 7 million, or 23 percent of the total Egyptian population.⁶² The first impetus for this rural-to-urban migration, in her opinion, was a selective process that “skims the qualitative cream from the countryside and sends it to the city.” The second, and more important numerically, impetus was a nonselective migration, primarily stemming from rapid population growth, which “created a backlog of agriculturalists who were neither needed on the land nor capable of being supported by it.”⁶³ In addition to these “push” factors, the much better chances for acquiring employment and education, particularly at the tertiary level, combined with high subsidies for basic foodstuffs and services, pulled large numbers of peasants into the cities.⁶⁴

Uprooted, however, from their natural surroundings, migrants often felt culturally and socially alienated. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that these newly arrived masses constituted fertile ground for populist leaders. In a period characterized by a high level of social dislocation, a charismatic, populist leader could project a “father” image, thus replacing the patrimonial and religious links that were lost or eroded during the transfer from the village to the city.⁶⁵ Indeed, it is a common knowledge that one of Nasser’s nicknames, especially among the younger generation, was *baba* (father).

It is reasonable to assume, as Abu-Lughod suggests, that migrants become “politicized” in direct proportion to their urbanization. In other words, as they become more integrated into the city, migrants tend to become more involved in politics.⁶⁶ By the mid-1950s, when Nasser emerged as a charismatic leader, many migrants flocking into the major cities were psychologically prepared for the appearance of such a leader. Although their actual political contribution would be rather limited, these migrants would play an active role in demonstrations and other mass political activities.

In sum, the conditions for the emergence of populism in Nasser’s Egypt were ripe, given the country’s political crisis, coupled with rising socioeconomic discontent.⁶⁷ In many ways, the Egyptian scene was even riper than in Latin American countries, which have been independent since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In addition, the cultural similarities between Latin America and the West in general somewhat softened the acuteness of the Western challenge there. In contrast, the Western challenge of the Arab-Islamic identity reached a peak in the 1950s, serving as a reminder to the average citizen of the inferiority of the Arab Middle East vis-à-vis the West.