ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Social Impact of French Occupation on Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to study social reforms and progress during the French occupation of Egypt from 1798 to 1801 and determine the true extent of the claim that occupation had positive effects leading to modernization of Egypt. This issue needs to be re-visited and re-evaluated in view of scholars who are still inclined to this opinion. Based on historical facts, this study finds that there was not much reform done in the country and the little done was only in the interest of the French, whether in terms of intellect, education, technology and so on. On the contrary, French arrival and colonisation had resulted in extensive destruction of property and a huge loss of lives from war and rebellion. In addition, the French had exposed the Islamic society of Egypt to negative characteristics of the Western culture. Genuine reform and progress only came after the French retreated, during the time of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (1805-1849) who had brought genuine economic and socio-political progress to Egypt finally leading to positive national development.

Key words: Social Impact, French Occupation, Egypt.

Introduction

Egypt or Arab Republic of Egypt is a country well-known for its historical human civilization of the Pharoanic times. It was succeeded by the Grecian-Roman civilization and after the Islamic arrival there, the emergence of several powers led by the Khulafa’ al-Rashidin, Bani Umayyah, Bani ‘al-Abbas, Tulun, Ikhshid, Fatimi, Ayyubi, Mamluk and ‘Uthmaniyyah (Ottoman Sovereignty) until Egypt was colonised by the Europeans, the French and the British. The domination of Egypt by many different governments has enriched her history for interesting study and analysis. Moreover, Egypt’s abundant economic resources and strategic location in the centre of trade routes between West and East have always attracted major powers to dominate her since long ago.

France as a European country was the earliest to occupy Egypt after her political decline at the end of the 18th Century. Competition between the British and the French, land-grabbing of Ottoman provinces among the European powers and British interest to control countries in North Africa and the Levant, had aroused the desire of France to dominate Egypt in order to strengthen French trade activities. Other than the factor of competition with the British and attempts to grab Ottoman provinces, the motive for occupying Egypt was also to wrest control of Baitul Maqdis (Jerusalem) from Islamic rule. Occupation of Egypt would pave the way to take control of Palestine, thus enabling France to annex Baitul Maqdis. Domination of Palestine was part of Napoleon Bonaparte’s promise to the Jews in Paris towards the formation of Israel over Palestine (Jarrar, 1990). Indirectly, the subjugation of Egypt and Palestine would be vengeance for French defeat in the old Crusades. At the same time, conquest of Egypt would serve the purpose of exploring in-depth the ancient Egyptian civilization in various fields such as politics, social and economics. It was also reported that the object of French arrival was to plunder the long acknowledged famous heritage of the historical treasures of Egypt.

French occupation lasted about three years from 1798 till 1801 and Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the French Generals was one of the individuals heading the expedition to occupy Egypt. Despite the short duration of the occupation, the majority of Western scholars maintain the claim that it had many positive effects on Egypt, including initiating Egypt’s modernisation. One of their statements is to the effect that modern Egypt is inconceivable without Bonaparte (Dykstra, 1998).

This statement gives an impression that European occupation had changed Egypt’s social landscape and that the French had brought modernization and progress to Egypt. This is the core issue which needs re-
evaluation to determine the validity of the claim and the extent of any positive impact of occupation as well as to determine whether the changes brought by France were meant to develop Egypt which was said to suffer oppression and persecution under Mamluk rule. This research focuses on the social background of Egypt, social changes and progress as well as the effects on Egypt and the society.

Social background of Egypt Before the French Arrival:

The Ottoman government declined in the 18th Century and this caused a spillover on Egypt following the ineffective rule of the appointed Pasha in Egypt. The Ottoman central government in Istanbul could not give much attention to administration in Egypt at that time because of its involvement in the continuing war with Russia and Austria. The Mamluk Beys were the most influential group in Egypt as the 18th Century approached, and each ruled their respective areas. They were at odds with each other out of self-interest and finally caused the people’s welfare to be neglected while oppression was widespread (El-Shayyal, 1968).

The 18th Century saw an intellectual decline in Egypt caused by several factors. Among them was the competition between Istanbul, a centre of Islamic culture and residence of the Ottoman Sultan, with Cairo, previously the seat of government and centre of Islamic learning, which was overshadowed by Istanbul (Gibb and Bowen, 1969). According to El-Shayyal (1968), the education system in Cairo in that century was still tied to the traditional system, whereby a student needed to travel from one place to another distant place to acquire knowledge. The field of education in the mosque and religious schools (madrasah) was narrow with emphasis on Arabic language (including prose and poetry), theology, logic and mathematics. In addition, teachers or even scholars were not as prolific as those in previous days who wrote original works. By this time, scholars only wrote based on the works of earlier scholars by giving their commentaries and interpretation of those writings without contributing any new knowledge to society.

By the last century of Ottoman rule in Egypt, the fields of science and technology, medicine, skills and thinking had also declined. It was reported that Egypt then had a shortage of specialists such that a surgeon was forced to be a general practitioner. In Cairo, there were only three pharmacists, two of whom were Venetian and Greek. In terms of skills, it was reported that a French traveller named Pulniah, who visited Egypt at the end of the 18th Century, gave a picture of widespread ignorance in Egypt in terms of literature, science, arts and manual skills and that it was rare to find someone who could repair a clock in Cairo city unless he was a European. In the religious field, a number of Egyptians were sufis who established sufı orders. However, there were also sufı orders who deviated and believed in superstition thus leading to backwardness such that some of them rejected reform and progress (El-Shayyal, 1968).

However, it is not denied that there were scholars who were experts in various fields in the 18th Century, but the number was not many. Among them were Shaykh Hasan al-Jabarti (mathematician and astronomist), Shaykh Muhammad al-Shubrawi, Shaykh Hasan al-‘Attar, Shaykh Isma’il al-Khashshab (literateur), Sayyid Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi (linguist and theologian) and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (historian). It was reported that their emergence was to revive Egypt’s golden age of culture and learning which had gone down as a result of internal problems in Egypt then. But, however, their efforts were hampered by the French arrival (El-Shayyal, 1968).

On the whole, the majority of the society in Egypt lived below the poverty level because many lived in the rural areas and were involved only in agriculture. The farming community was always oppressed as well as burdened by various high taxes imposed by the Multazim who comprised of greedy Mamluk leaders. There was no monitoring mechanism or strict control from the central goverment over the activities of these Multazim and this worsened the life of the farmers.

The overall condition of the society in Egypt just before the French arrival was not good. On the contrary, they were stressed with various internal problems which caused the country to be easily subjugated by the colonial French. Even though Egypt was once the Islamic intellectual and cultural centre, her internal problems caused her to deteriorate until she became an easy target for Western subjugation, specifically the French who were always scouting for such opportunities (Mujani and Hj. Ismail, 2010).

The Social Impact of French Occupation on Egypt:

The French occupation of Egypt only lasted about 3 years, so what is the extent of social reform and positive impact? This is an interesting issue for analysis to determine the validity of the claim. Research shows that the French occupation in Egypt had both positive and negative effects as follows:

i) Effect on Scholars and Learning in Egypt:

It is said by most Western writers that the French occupation had a great positive effect in terms of knowledge development. However, after detailed examination, the writer finds that it is not as claimed. Only a
small number of the scholars benefitted and anything that the French implemented in terms of knowledge was motivated by their own selfish interest. Until now, the historical materials have on record the names of only four scholars who had good relations with the French in the field of knowledge. They were Shaykh al-Mahdi, Shaykh al-Khashshah, Shaykh al-‘Attar and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti. They taught Arabic language to French officers, learnt a bit of Western knowledge and had visited the research institute established by Napoleon. Thus, the role and impact of these four scholars in mobilizing reform of education or the development of knowledge in Egypt was extremely limited in view of their small number in comparison to the large population of Egypt and moreover, they did not have any political clout to ensure a resounding success of any plan. However, when the French had retreated from Egyptian soil, efforts were begun to develop Egypt, specifically during the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha.

And the establishment of Institut d’Egypt by Napoleon at Qasim Bey Palace on 22nd August 1798 was for the purpose of furthering French interest in various aspects of research on Egypt (Girgis, 1975). In fact, this institute was the advisory body to the French on matters related to government policy. Research conducted was required to be published once every 3 months and submitted to the authorities (Vatikiotis, 1969). Every division or committee set up in the institute had its own role in helping the government to administer Egypt. For example, the Mathematics Division had carried out a project of town-planning the city of Cairo, sketching the map of the Suez Canal and conducting a survey of tax collection from the public by the Mamluks (Al-Iskandari, 1916). The Economics and Political Division gave serious attention to the issue of identification card which was required to be in every Egyptian’s possession, in addition to providing documents on inheritance rights such as a certificate which showed that a beneficiary had the right to claim his inheritance from the estate of the deceased and so on.

In addition, there were some other divisions which conducted research for the benefit of the French such as the Committee for the Production of Explosive Powder comprising of 5 officers, Andreossy, Berthollet, Monge, Malus and Venture. And the Committee for Research on Fuel was entrusted to Berthollet, Costaz, Desegenettes and Guletien (Girgis, 1975). This includes the Archeology Division which studies the invaluable treasures and heritage of Egypt such as the Khufu Big Pyramid, the Sphinx, Rosetta Inscribed Stone and the Pharonic Tombs found in northern and southern Egypt (Oakes, 2003; Marlowe, 1974). It cannot be denied that the establishment of Institut d’Egypt can be considered as something new for Egyptians because through it they could see the progress of France. However, the benefits for the Egyptian people and scholars was too limited. This is evident in the membership of the institute which was strictly open only for the French, and Egyptian scholars were allowed only to visit it. Visits to the institute were briefly recorded by Al-Jabarti (1975) in his work entitled ‘Aja’ib al-Athar fi al-Tarajim wa al-Akhbar.’

The French arrival is said to have introduced Egyptians to the printing press brought by Napoleon (Heyworth-Dunne, 1968). He was reported to have brought two printing machines, the function of which was more to disseminate propaganda, directives and declarations of the French authorities in brochures to the locals. Napoleon had published the first French newspaper in Egypt, Le Courrier de L’Egypte which contained news of political developments in Europe. In addition, another paper for the French was the weekly La Décade Égyptienne containing science and literature materials of research from Institut d’Egypt (Marlowe, 1974). According to Girgis (1975), the first Arabic newspaper, al-Ushuriah al-Masriyyah was also printed. However, readership circulation among Egyptians was rather limited due to the low literacy rate then.

**ii) Effect on Education:**

The French occupation of Egypt caused disruptions in the education system of religious schools (madrasah) when many scholars who were teachers left Cairo after French arrival. This was caused by the French hardline attitude towards scholars who opposed them to the extent of having them executed. The act of a number of scholars abandoning Cairo as fugitives hunted by the French had caused learning in religious schools to be retarded for a while. In the meantime, the French had set up two schools for French children in Egypt. Napoleon had also planned to set up an art school and a public hospital to function as a medical school for locals to train their children in medicine. However, education in the school would use French language as medium of instruction, so for that purpose, a primary school teaching French was first to be established. However, Napoleon’s plans did not materialise because of the short duration of the French occupation in Egypt and it was also reported that they were not serious in implementing it (Heyworth-Dunne, 1968).

**iii) Destruction of Property and Loss of Lives:**

One of the negative effects of the French occupation in Egypt was the loss of lives and destruction of property whether by the Egyptians themselves or by the French. Beginning from the time the French gained a foothold in Egypt until the time they retreated, a few wars had erupted between the French and the Mamluk army. The Battle of the Pyramid on the 21st July 1798 had witnessed the death of 300 French soldiers whereas
the Mamluk army lost 10,000 men (Bey, 1976). The catastrophe which the French suffered in Abu Qir when the British ambushed the French navy on 1st August 1798, known as the the Battle of the Nile, had resulted in great destruction and loss to the French. From 14 French warships which docked in Abu Qir, only 2 were saved and sailed off to Malta, whereas 12 of the warships including the ship L'Orient were totally destroyed causing Admiral Bruey to perish in the incident. And out of 38,000 French men who took part in the expedition, only 15,000 were still in Egypt after the incident (Connelly, 2006; Dykstra, 1998).

The Cairo rebellion which erupted on the 21st October 1798 witnessed great destruction in Cairo when Napoleon instructed a bomb to be thrown into the premises of the Al-Azhar resulting in destruction of buildings in the vicinity and extensive damage to the Al-Azhar Mosque. It was reported that 2,000 to 3,000 of Egyptians, including civilians, were killed whereas 300 French men died including General Dupuy and Aide-de Camp Sulkowski (Chandler, 1966). The French army was also reported to have entered the mosque on their horses, breaking lamps, seizing and destroying books and desecrating copies of the Qur'an by trampling on them (Al-Jabarti, 1975). At the same time, the French army arrested leaders of the rebellion the majority of whom were Al-Azhar scholars, including 6 Syeikhs and 80 men who were reported to have been executed in the Citadel (Chandler, 1966).

Meanwhile, from Napoleon’s campaign of 13,000 soldiers to Syria, he returned to Egypt with only 8,000 survivors. 2,500 were reported killed and another 2,500 were casualties of a cholera outbreak. The second Cairo rebellion which occurred from 20th march to 21st April 1800 witnessed an alliance of Egyptian Muslims and Qbiti Christians who joined hands collecting money to purchase weapons and ammunition to fight the French. A series of battles followed with the arrival of the Ottoman and British armies, but the extent of losses could not be determined. Up to the year 1800, the French had experienced loss of 12,000 soldiers in addition to destruction of warships and combat equipment. At the time of surrender in 1801, it was reported that 8,000 soldiers who were with Menou gave themselves up and withdrew from Egypt from an original total of 38,000 men who took part in the expedition in Egypt.

iv) Exposure to Western Culture:

Western culture not anchored in Islamic values seeped through into Egyptian society without being realized. Even though it might not divert the faith of the Egyptian society, especially the Muslims, the unhealthy culture exhibited by French soldiers had caused a shock to the society such that some were swayed to imitate. Among the the irreverence displayed by the French were drinking alcohol in public, indulging in entertainment and seeking illicit pleasure in women. And the women did not dress modestly while there were Muslim women who were encouraged to uncover their heads in public. The French culture was evidently opposed to the traditions of Egyptians who always dressed modestly in public and stayed away from what is prohibited in Islam. In addition, there were French people who did not respect Muslims by eating and drinking in public in the fasting month of Ramadan. Napoleon was also reported to have opened night clubs, theatres and casino to provide entertainment for his soldiers and cure them of homesickness for their country (Bey, 1976; Chandler, 1966).

v) Public Awareness for Liberation from French colonialism:

The French occupation was actually a temporary disturbance of the Egyptian system and culture and of Arab countries generally. The direct effect upon Egyptian thought and mentality was the awareness of the reality of their life and the progress achieved by the West. Almost all the scholars who did not leave Egypt during French occupation realised this. However, some others viewed non-Muslim French occupation as unacceptable. Thus, it is not surprising that they rose in complete rebellion despite the awareness that they were inadequately equipped with weapon technology. This matter was brought up by scholars such as Shaykh Muhammad al-Sadat, an influential scholar who made Al-Azhar as opposition headquarters. Declaration of Jihad against French occupation issued by the Ottoman Sultan, Sultan Salim III who delivered his message through Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar, Governor of Syria on 11th September 1798, had boosted the people’s morale. It was reported that the declaration of Jihad was also welcomed by the other Arab countries, including Syria and Hijaz which later acted in sending their armies to help the Ottoman Sovereignty drive the French out of Egypt (Mujani and Hj. Ismail, 2010).

A clear effect of the declaration was the Cairo Rebellion on the 21st October 1798 triggered by some factors. Among these was the people’s grievance over the high tax rates and other burdensome regulations imposed upon them by the French. And the propaganda and policy on Islam by the Napoleon regime, such as using the scholars in administration and in declaring that France was a friend of Islam and the Ottoman Sovereignty, could not pull the wool over the people’s eyes. Even though many people and scholars were killed in the first rebellion, the spirit for liberating their country from the colonizers did not fade away leading to the second rebellion which involved scholars, traders and residents of Cairo. This movement was headed by Sayyid
‘Umar Makram and Sayyid Ahmad al-Mahruqi, a wealthy businessman. It took the French army a month to put down the rebellion, from 20th March to 21st April. Not long after the rebellion, the French General, Kleber was killed by Sulayman al-Halabi, one of the Al-Azhar students on 14th June 1800 and he was replaced by Abdullah Jacques Menou (‘Umar, 1975).

The Egyptians were aware of the French intention to colonize and bring an adverse impact on their country. Rebellion to oust a foreign power and the assassination of a French general showed overt opposition from the Egyptians apart from the attacks by the Mamluk leaders and Ottoman army. The seriousness of the scholars and other Islamic leaders in raising public awareness to oppose the infidel power had impacted the mentality not to be fooled by the propaganda of the Napoleon regime (Mujani and Hj. Ismail, 2010).

Conclusion:

It has been acknowledged that socially, French occupation had caused extensive destruction of property and great loss of human lives, especially of Egyptians. It also exposed the Egyptians to part of the Western culture which was contrary to Islamic teachings. The reform to the education system is not clear as the French had their own system and schools were built for the purpose of educating French children in Egypt. It is obvious that the education system in religious schools was disrupted and retarded for a while when many scholars who were teachers left Cairo or were arrested or executed by the French. The establishment of Institut d’Egypt was seen as advancing French interest in various aspects of research on Egypt. In fact, it became the advisory body to the French in formulating government policies. Only a minority of Egyptian scholars benefitted from it because membership of the institute was open only to French people. And the introduction of the printing press was not for the purpose of educating the public, instead it was more for spreading propaganda, directives and declarations by the French authorities in a more convenient and effective way as compared to orally.

It is undeniable that the French had introduced some new ideas, however, real reform for the Egyptian public, particularly in knowledge and technological progress only materialised in the time of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, three years after the French withdrew. He had worked diligently to advance Egypt as the country had lagged behind in knowledge and technological progress in comparison to Western achievements. He had instituted revamping and reformation in various fields such as military, education, agriculture, industry, commerce, transportation and so on. Thus, it is not surprising that he became known as the Founder of Modern Egypt. Generally, it can be concluded that the French occupation had brought major adverse social effects rather than positive effects on Egypt and her people because any reform and development implemented were not in the people’s interest.

References