

THE ERA OF LIBERAL CONSTITUTIONALISM AND PARTY POLITICS

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The Rise and Decline of the Wafd, 1924-39

Political life in Egypt during this period has been described as basically triangular, consisting of the king, the Wafd, and the British. The basis of British power was its army of occupation as well as British officials in the administration, police, and army. The king's power rested on the rights he could exercise in accordance with the 1923 constitution and partly on the permanence of his position. The king's rights included selecting and appointing the prime minister, dismissing the cabinet, and dissolving Parliament. The Wafd's power was based on its popular support and its command of a vast majority in Parliament.

These three forces in Egyptian politics were of unequal strength. The British had overwhelming power, and if their interests were at stake, their power prevailed over the other two. The king was in a stronger position than the Wafd because his power was difficult to curb while the Wafd could easily be removed from power. The Wafd embodied parliamentary democracy in Egypt; thus, by its very existence, it constituted a threat to both the king and the British. To the king, any democratic system was a threat to his autocratic rule. To the British, a democratic system meant that in any free election the Wafd would be voted into power. The British believed that the Wafd in power was a threat to their own power in the country. Thus, the British attempted to destroy the power of the Wafd and to use the king as a counter to the Wafd.

In the parliamentary election of January 12, 1924, the Wafd won 179 of 211 parliamentary seats. Two seats each went to the Wafd's opponents, the National Party and the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, a party founded in 1922 and considered excessively cooperative with the British. The Wafd felt it had a mandate to conclude a treaty with Britain that would assure Egypt complete independence. As prime minister, Zaghlul carefully selected a cross-section of Egyptian society for his cabinet, which he called the "People's Ministry." On March 15, 1924, the king opened the first Egyptian constitutional parliament amid national rejoicing. The Wafdist government did not last long, however.

In November 19, 1924, Sir Lee Stack, the British governor general of Sudan and commander of the Egyptian army, was assassinated in [Cairo](#). The assassination was one of a series of killings of British officials that had begun in 1920. Allenby, who considered Stack an old and trusted friend, was determined to avenge the crime and in the process humiliate the Wafd and destroy its credibility in Egypt. Allenby demanded that Egypt apologize, prosecute the assailants, pay a £500,000 indemnity, withdraw all troops from Sudan, consent to an unlimited increase of British troops in Sudan and end all opposition to the capitulations (Britain's demand of the right to protect foreign interests in the country). Zaghlul wanted to resign rather than accept the ultimatum, but Allenby presented it to him before Zaghlul could offer his resignation to the king. Zaghlul and his cabinet decided to accept the first four terms but to reject the last two. On November 24, after ordering the Ministry of Finance to pay the indemnity, Zaghlul resigned. He died three years later.

During the 1930s, Ismail Sidqi emerged as the "strong man" of Egyptian politics and an ardent opponent of the Wafd. It was he who abolished the constitution in 1930 and drafted another that enhanced the power of the monarch. He formed his own party, Al Hizb ash Shaab, which merged with the Ittihad Party in 1938. Also in 1938, dissident members of the Wafd formed the Saadist Party, named after Saad Zaghlul.

In April 28, 1936, King Fuad died and was succeeded by his son, Faruk. In the May elections, the Wafd won 89 percent of the vote and 157 seats in Parliament.

Negotiations with the British for a treaty to resolve matters that had been left outstanding since 1922 had resumed. The British delegation was led by its high commissioner, Miles Lampson, and the Egyptian delegation by Wafdist leader and prime minister, Mustafa Nahhas. On August 26, a draft treaty that came to be known as the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 was signed.

The treaty provided for an Anglo-Egyptian military and defense alliance that allowed Britain to maintain a garrison of 10,000 men in the Suez Canal Zone. In addition, Britain was left in virtual control of Sudan. This contradicted the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement of 1899 that provided that Sudan be governed by Egypt and Britain jointly. In spite of the agreement, however, real power was in British hands. Egyptian army units had been withdrawn from Sudan in the aftermath of the Stack assassination, and the governor general was British. Nevertheless, Egyptian nationalists, and the Wafd particularly, continued to demand full Egyptian control of Sudan.

The treaty did provide for the end of the capitulations and the phasing out of the mixed courts. The British high commissioner was redesignated ambassador to Egypt, and when the British inspector general of the Egyptian army retired, an Egyptian officer was appointed to replace him.

In spite of these advances, the treaty did not give Egypt full independence, and its signing produced a wave of anti-Wafdist and anti-British demonstrations. To many of its followers, in negotiating and signing the treaty the Wafd had betrayed the nationalist cause. Because of this perception and also because it had failed to develop and implement a program for social and economic reform, the Wafd declined in power and influence. Although it considered itself the representative of the nation, the Wafd failed to offer meaningful domestic programs to deal with the problems of under- and unemployment, high living costs, lack of industrial development, and unequal distribution of land. Thus, during the 1930s, support for the Wafd, particularly among students and urban middle-class professionals and civil servants, was eroded by more militant, paramilitary organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan al Muslimun, also known as the Brotherhood) and Young Egypt (Misr al Futuwwa).

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by religious leader Hasan al Banna who established himself as the supreme guide leading his followers in a purified Islamic state. The Brotherhood represented a trend in the Islamic reform movement that attributed the difficulties in Islamic society to a deviation from the ideals and practices of early Islam during the period of the first four caliphs. The aim, therefore, was to return society to a state of purity by reforming it from within and purging it of foreign domination and influence. The Brotherhood consisted of nationwide cells, battalions, youth groups, and a secret apparatus for underground activities.

Young Egypt was founded in 1933 by a lawyer, Ahmad Husayn. It was a radical nationalist organization with religious elements. Its aim was to make Egypt a great empire, which would consist of Egypt and Sudan. The empire would act as an ally to Arab countries and serve as the leader of Islam. It was also a militaristic organization whose young members were organized in a paramilitary movement called the Green Shirts. The organization had fascist overtones and openly admired Nazi achievements. As German power grew, Young Egypt's anti-British tone increased.

Both of these organizations presented clearly defined programs for political, economic, and social reform. Both also represented a new political movement whose ideology was not the liberal constitutionalism of the nationalist movement, which was regarded as having failed.