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Will post-July Bangladesh learn from post-July Egypt?

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IN JULY-AUGUST 2024, people around the world were amazed by the courage and heroism of the youth of Bangladesh who launched a movement against the oppressive regime of Sheikh Hasina. Known as the July revolution, it put to an end over 15 years of Hasina's rule that was marked by massive corruption and human rights violations. Over 1,400 young people were killed by government forces and innumerable others lost their limbs. Finally, Hasina fell and fled the country on August 5, 2024. On August 8, 2024, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus formed an interim government that has overseen the general election of February 12, 2026.

With an election victory, Tarique Rahman-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party has formed a majority government in Bangladesh. How will the country be run by a political system? Will it be embroiled in chaos, corruption and human rights abuses again?

A look at Egypt's 1952 political change may shed some light and help Bangladesh navigate its post-July phenomenon and make the July revolution successful.

Despite its multiple revolutions in the near and distant past, unfortunately, the dominant image of Egypt on the global stage is often frustratingly negative. Over the decades, corruption, political repression and instability, poverty and destitution, and inequality have become common experiences in the country.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus dubbed Egypt as 'the gift of the Nile.' Moreover, the country is often regarded as the heart of the Arab world. Unfortunately, in this country of rich history and beautiful landscapes that include the wonders of pyramids, currently there are tens of thousands of political prisoners languishing in prison cells. After all, the country is no stranger to various forms of human rights abuses including police violence and custodial torture and death.

What brought Egypt to this decades-long sad state of affairs? Didn't the Egyptians have new beginnings? What did the popular revolutions give to the people of Egypt? Addressing such questions head-on may help post-July 2024 Bangladesh learn from Egyptian experiences and avoid the slip-ups that Egypt made.

Studying the context of an Egyptian literary text is perhaps useful in this regard.

The academic discipline to which I belong is called global literature. It has instilled in me a thirst for knowledge about different peoples and cultures in the world. It facilitates my encounters with various texts, developing my increased sense of global awareness.

Recently, I sought to understand the political and historical background of Egyptian woman writer Zaynab al-Ghazali's *Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison* (1994). Its original Arabic version — *Ayyam min Hayati* (Days from my Life) — was published in 1977. My research led me to Egypt's July 1952 revolution. As Bangladesh's July 2024 revolution did to Bangladeshis, it gave the people of Egypt a burst of renewed optimism and enthusiasm. It offered them a ray of hope for a brighter future and gave them dreams of freedom, growth and development.

Discussing the relevant political history of Egypt will help understand its July movement and its aftermath.

Constitutional monarchy in Egypt was established in 1922 under King Fuad I even though real power rested in the hands of the colonial British who maintained a huge military presence in the Suez Canal Zone. He ruled the country until his death in 1936 when his son King Farouk came to power at the age of 16. Farouk was officially crowned one year later in 1937 and reigned the country until July 23, 1952, when he was overthrown by the military-led July revolution. This marked the end of the Muhammad Ali dynasty that had begun in 1805 and ruled both Egypt and Sudan.

The nature and composition of the Free Officers Movement or Egypt's July revolution — led by General Muhammad Naguib and General Gamal Abdel Nasser — that brought down the Farouk regime in 1952 are different from that of Bangladesh's student-led July 2024 revolution. Nonetheless, similarities between the two events and their contexts are difficult to ignore.

Among the reasons why the Egyptians rose against the government of Farouk were its widespread corruption and the outside (principally British) influences on its domestic and foreign policies. Farouk had little control over how the country was being run. Although, during his reign, repression of all opposition groups was stamped with heavy-handedness, the primary targets were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is because Farouk's political masters — the British — regarded them as the major obstacles to establish absolute and unquestioned domination over Egypt. Accordingly, 'clashes between the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] and the government of King Farouk become more and more frequent, and more and more violent in nature' and the Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan al-Banna and his organisation 'began to actively seek out military officers who shared some general agreement concerning the need to bring the reign of King Farouk to an end' (David Polizzi, *Toward a phenomenology of terrorism*. Springer International Publishing, 2021. p. 68). In such a political context, Hassan al-Banna was assassinated in Cairo in 1949 under dubious circumstances.

When corruption, repression and foreign domination reached an unbearable and unprecedented level in Farouk's Egypt, various anti-regime groups came together. Thus, the July 1952 revolution was launched and the Farouk regime was toppled.

Just as Britain was the dominant foreign actor that exerted overriding influences in Farouk's Egypt, the big neighbouring country India wielded considerable political power in the domestic and foreign policies of Hasina-ruled Bangladesh, especially from early 2009 to mid-2024. Britain backed the government of Farouk with a view to controlling the Suez Canal, as it sought to smoothen its marine traffic and guarantee the unhindered oil supply from Arab countries to Europe. Similarly, the regional power of India was keen on helping perpetuate Hasina's rule in Bangladesh in order to continue using its ports and land transportation to its advantage.

As it happened in Egypt, in Bangladesh people of different ages and of a broad range of political and non-political backgrounds came together to launch the July 2024 revolution and put an end to the era of Hasina's one-party dominance.

However, toppling a repressive government doesn't automatically guarantee the establishment of justice and peace in a country. This is proven by the experience of Egypt's July 1952 revolution.

One year after Egypt's July revolution, in 1953 the country became a republic and General Muhammad Naguib became its first president. The next year, in 1954, another leader of the July revolution General Gamal Abdel Nasser took power and ruled the country until his death in 1970.

Sadly, Egypt's July revolution didn't bring lasting peace, stability and prosperity to the country.

Soon after the political change of 1952, the country relapsed into its former state of disorder, political instability, internal conflict, authoritarian rule, the familiar pattern of dictatorship and a culture of fear among its people. Some form of foreign domination in Egypt remains unabated even though its July revolution sought to end it.

In an article titled 'Where I Stand and Why' published in the magazine Life (vol. 47, no. 3) on July 20, 1959, President Gamal Abdel Nasser wrote: 'It is now seven years since the 1952 revolution freed Egypt from the corrupt regime of King Farouk and the foreign influences which dominated him. Preserving that freedom has not been easy' (p. 96).

The same is somewhat true in the case of Bangladesh, as protecting the newfound freedom in the country in the post-July 2024 era is not and will not be easy.

Whether or not the blood of Bangladesh's July (youth) warriors will be wasted, whether or not Bangladesh's July uprising will end in success or failure, and whether or not Bangladesh will remain under foreign control — all these depend on the sincerity and sagacity (or lack thereof) of the government and leaders of major political parties. I hope Bangladesh will take lessons from Egypt's July movement and will tread with caution for the collective good of its people. The mandate Tarique Rahman and BNP obtained on February 12, 2026, should not make him and his party overweening and autocratic.

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