



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Egyptians campaign for independence, 1919-1922

13 January

1919

to: February

1922

Country: Egypt

Goals:

The Wafd Party's constitution declared that they would "seek by peaceful and legal means the complete independence of Egypt."

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 097. Protest strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 056. Selective social boycott
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 104. Professional strike

- 125. Boycott of government employment and positions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 076. National consumers' boycott

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 076. National consumers' boycott

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Egyptian citizens spanning religion and class

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Saad Zaghlul, leader of the Wafd Party

Wafd Party

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Prime Minister Hussein Rushdi Pasha, General Edmund Allenby, Lord Alfred Milner

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Wafd Party

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

British Colonial Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Britain dispatched Lord Milner to investigate the status in Egypt (though it was for Britain's own interests).

Campaigner violence:

There was reported initial violence in Cairo's protests as well as at some of demonstrations in the countryside.

Repressive Violence:

At the same initial protests there was reported violence on behalf of the British forces, yet on both sides no known violence occurred after that which occurred at those demonstrations.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Egyptians, led by the Wafd Party, were able to gain independence, though limited, from Britain, comprising a very successful campaign.

Egypt became a British protectorate on December 14, 1914. During World War I agitation towards the British increased as all sects of the population united in their discontent. British rule caused Egypt's involvement in the war to increase – 1.5 million Egyptians were conscripted in the Labour Corps and much of the country's infrastructure was seized for the army – contributing to the dissatisfaction.

Saad Zaghlul, a former education minister, founded the Wafd (literally meaning delegation) Party, or the Egyptian Delegation Party, during World War I. The party, comprised of activists spanning political parties and classes, became prominent soon after the war. Their immediate goal was the end of the protectorate. Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points (in which he stressed all people had the right to self-determination) was a catalyst and inspiration for the nationalists.

Consequently, two days after the November 11, 1918, armistice, Zaghlul, along with 'Abd al-'Aziz and 'Ali Sha'rawi, requested that the High Commissioner Sir Reginald Wingate allow them to travel to London and officially present Egypt's demand for independence. Previously, Wingate had been interested in meeting with the Wafd leaders, but the British authority overrode the possibility. Prime Minister Hussein Rushdi Pasha supported the right of the Wafd to present their case in London or Paris as well. Zaghlul also sent a telegram to Wilson asking for his support of Egyptian independence.

On January 13, 1919, five days before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, the Wafd party held a General Congress at the home of its member Hamad Pasha Basil. The British had continually refused them the right to go to London or Paris to talk with leaders and yet a Syrian delegation was allowed to attend the Peace Conference. Indignant, Zaghlul spoke at the General Congress about Egypt's right to independence as championed by Muhammad Ali the Great and acknowledged by Europe in 1840. The party then sent cables to the London House of Commons and other political leaders, but they received no signs of support.

The Wafdists planned to hold another mass meeting on January 31, but the British forces stopped them from assembling. Zaghlul was unable to publicly speak again until February 7, when he stole the platform at the end of a speech given by a European advisor to the Court of Appeals on criminal law. The British were becoming concerned over the Wafd Party's growing support and audacity.

Meanwhile, the Wafdists disseminated and collected thousands of signed powers of attorneys from Egyptian citizens, which were sent via telegram to the Sultani Diwan in support of Zaghlul. Wafdists also conducted another grass roots campaign, collecting signatures to allow Zaghlul and other leaders of the Wafdist party to petition for Egypt's independence.

On March 8, 1919, the British arrested Zaghlul and two other of the movement's leaders, and expelled them to Malta, fearing the movement was gaining too much power. Protests and strikes erupted across the country, especially Cairo and Alexandria, sustaining until April and incorporating Egyptians of all backgrounds: men, women, Muslims, and Christians (Copts), intellectuals, shop owners, and tradesmen.

On March 9, 1919, students at the Egyptian University and students at Al-Azhar demonstrated. (Initial protests in Cairo reportedly incurred some violence on behalf of both sides, and initial protests in the countryside allegedly also involved some violence).

Over 10,000 students, workers, and professionals marched on Cairo's Abdin Palace on March 15, where they were met by thousands more protesters discontent with British rule. The next day, the wives of the exiled leaders, Safia Zaghlul, Huda Sharawi, and Mana Fahmi Wissa, organized a march of thousands of women in traditional garb. They carried flags of the crescent and cross, representing Muslim and Christian (i.e. entire country) unification. These women of the upper class were important leaders in boycotting British goods and directing other protests throughout the campaign for independence. Transport workers, judges, and lawyers engaged in massive strikes as well.

By the third week of sustained protests in March, Britain realized that the political climate was spiraling out of control and so began a series of changes in the country. They replaced High Commissioner Wingate, who was seen as too sympathetic to the Egyptian cause, with an Acting High Commissioner only to then appoint the acclaimed General Edmund Allenby as Special High Commissioner soon after on March 24. Allenby met with a representative group of the nationalists. They reached a negotiation in which the campaigners promised in writing to end the protests in exchange for the allowance of the exiled leaders to go to Paris. They were released on the April 7 and travelled to Paris on the 11th.

Back in early April, Egyptians had started a strike. On the 2nd, a delegation of nationalists voted to begin a strike until: the Wafd party was recognized by the British as the official representative party of Egypt, the protectorate was abolished, and martial law was ended. The strike was meant to last for three days but was extended indefinitely.

A general assembly was held days later on April 16 at al-Azhar – a historical and symbolic location for Egyptians – with all classes of society from across the country represented. The participants drafted a letter of the campaign's demands. One day later, the strike begun in early April morphed into a general strike. Egyptians responsible for watering and sweeping the streets refused to carry out their jobs, creating insufferable street conditions. The British were forced to use groups of prisoners for the task. The Rushdi government resigned on April 21, leading nationalists to believe there was finally recognition of Zaghlul's right to rule and represent the national cause, and so they concluded the strike on April 23.

Britain faced difficulty with the growing state of civil disobedience and sent Lord Alfred Milner, a statesman and colonial

administrator, to Egypt in December on a special diplomatic mission to assess the possibilities of maintaining British control in Egypt while placating the demand for independence. He arrived on December 7. In response, Wafdists and supporters boycotted his meetings, closed shops, struck, and pamphleted against cooperation with the 'Milner Mission'. The Wafd party learned of the hotel where Milner was staying and was even able to control all the meetings he had with Egyptians, from the people he spoke with to the information they shared with him.

More acts of civil disobedience followed during the Milner Mission: students demonstrated against the playing of British military music; 15,000 nationalists met at Alexandria's mosque Abu'l-'Abbas al-Mursi; ministers quit and lawyers went on strike, confounding the judicial system. Provincial councils, trade guilds, religious communities, and students all strategized against the British rule. In about three months, Milner was sent 1,130 messages from Egyptian nationalists.

Milner left Egypt in March 1920. In his report of the situation, he advised that Britain abolish the protectorate and grant Egypt independence. He saw the hostile stance of the Egyptian people as uncontrollable and believed Britain would not be able to continue to pursue its interests given such public opinion. Also due to the outpouring of public sentiment, Milner decided to include Zaghlul in negotiations in Paris. Private talks occurred during the summer of 1920. The meetings were a major accomplishment for the Wafdists and resulted in one change: the participants agreed to abolish the precondition of the protectorate in order to hold a negotiation over independence.

On April 4, 1921, Zaghlul returned to Egypt. Allenby was convinced Zaghlul was a British puppet in their plans to create a new independent Egypt representing British interests. Thus, he exiled Zaghlul in December – this time he was deported to the Seychelles. As with Zaghlul's first exiling, Egyptians responded with strikes and protests across the country.

On February 28, 1922 Britain declared limited independence for Egypt. They did not incorporate any of the opposition leaders in their negotiations, however, in order to maintain control of significant details. Most importantly, Britain kept control of Sudan and maintained its right to defend foreign interests in Egypt. A new Egyptian constitution was created in 1923, and in the 1924 election the Wafdists won a significant majority of seats in parliament. Zaghlul also became Prime Minister. The Wafd party was prominent politically until the early 1950s.

Overall, the Egyptian struggle for independence from 1919-1922 is hailed as the first nonviolent mass protest in the modern Middle East.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Egyptian campaign influenced the movement for India's independence from Britain led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and also influenced the later revolution 1952 Egyptian revolution for full independence (though it was not peaceful).
(2)

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