THE PASSING OF AN EPOCH

The passing of Gamal Abdel Nasser makes orphans of the Arab world. His presence spanned national boundaries. No Arab leader even within his own country could match the charisma of this historic personality. He was the one authentic Arab leader thrown up by history to lead the Arabs towards their place in the sun. Today Arabs of all countries mourn the death of this Arab giant.

For he came upon the Arab world in their moment of supreme crisis. He was the right man, at the right time and in the right place who was singled out by posterity to lead the contemporary Arab renaissance.

He came to power in Egypt in 1952 at a time when the Arabs were recovering from the humiliation of the first Arab-Israel war. Anger was directed against the creator-Western imperialism.

But the countries were ruled by an effete feudal world of Kings, Beys and Pashas who sold their people time and time again for Western gold. The Arabs needed a genuine leader not only to challenge the hated imperialist but also to sweep away the motley collation of rules who fattened themselves on Arab humiliation and misery. Nasser's rise to power was symbolic of this new force which had risen from within the Arab nation.

At his death we can evaluate the achievements of this man and his epoch. Today imperialism is virtually isolated in the Arab world where it retains only a precarious foothold. When Nasser shouted his defiance at the western powers by nationalising the Suez Canal in 1956 he inspired the Arabs by his open challenge to the big powers. Inspite of the Israeli invasion carried out as a cover for the Anglo-French aggression on Egypt, he emerged the hero of the moment. Since then, we have seen imperialism defeated in Syria Iraq, Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and weakened in the rest of the Arab world.

Nasser's confrontation with imperialism could not have sustained itself but for the social revolution carried out within Egypt. Whatever may be the state of the Egyptian economy today, Nasser has performed a permanent service to his people by destroying the Egyptian exploiting classes - the landlord and the capitalist. Today the *fellah* owns his land. Major sectors of the economy are owned by the people. Western capital has been eliminated. Domestic capitalism survives as a barely tolerated tributary of the socialist sector. This has set the pattern for the rest of the Arab world.

But Nasser's revolution remains unfinished. He dies with Israel in occupation of Sinai, the canal a wasting asset. Whilst he confronted the West and revolutionised his country he could not make soldiers out of the Egyptian *fellahin*. The Six Day war was the nadir of his reign. In the wake of its humiliation he put his own reputation on the line by offering his resignation. A million Arabs invaded Cairo and pledged their tears and blood to Nasser. In defeat he lived through his greatest moment.

With Israel entrenched on the banks of Suez, Nasser was approaching the crossroads of his life. Faced with the basic reality of his army's military incapability he was being driven to come to terms with Israel. The knowledge that the Russians, were hesitant to fight a war on his behalf must have made the limitations of his army even more apparent.

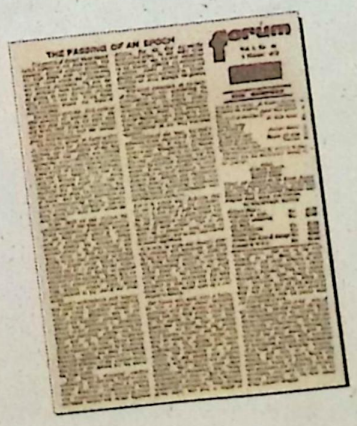
The failure of the army was itself a reflection of the character of the Egyptian revolution. It was a revolution from on top. Brought about by Nasser, in his own way and at his own pace. His own charisma was the sole link between the Egyptian revolution and the people. It was not possible to invest them with a sense of personal involvement in the defense and regeneration of their country. This grim reality was driving him to humiliating compromise with the Israeli and confrontation with the Palestinian *Fedayeen*.

For it is within the *Fedayeen* that we see a glimmer of the succession. This is a new Arab held together not by the charisma of a great leader but by the dedication and political motivation of each soldier. This is the birth of a people's army ready to fight a people's war as the only answer to Israeli aggression.

It is only in death that Nasser's greatest enemies will appreciate his place in the Arab revolution. No leader of the Third World inspired such bitter and personalised hatred in the West, within Israel or amongst the Arab ruling classes. All believed that he was personally responsible for their problems in that area and his overthrow or death would open up a new chapter in history.

But Nasser was more than a leader, he was a symbol whose incredible command over the masses not just of Egypt but the Arab world, owed itself to his ability to reach into their hearts and articulate their innermost thoughts. At his death the people have become voiceless but the emotions to which he gave tongue will live on in the struggle for united confrontation with Zionism and imperialism. The realisation of a just society for the people and against privilege will continue to fire the Arab struggle. Only Nasser could have tempered and channelised this. Today his enemies will have to face the wrath of the people directly, without Nasser's moderating intervention. Arab discord at his death will give a respite to the agressors. But out of the void created by his death the people themselves will come forward to take up arms. The *Fedayeen* have shown the way in Palestine. They will appear throughout the Arab world to take this revolution forward. When the West sees the face of this new force they will weep for there will never be any compromise with the people until the final battle is won.

Gamal Nasser died at the crest of his influence. He was spared the agony of being transformed by history, from the revolutionary of yesterday into the reactionary of tomorrow. He will pass into legend as the man who liberated the spirit of the Arab nation, gave them back their self respect after centuries of humiliations and laid the foundations of an Arab nation bound by language, culture and faith in a common destiny. He was the torch bearer of a generation which is passing. Let the new generation, the legatees of the Arab revolution, now carry the torch lit by Nasser forward to the final phase of the people's struggle.


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