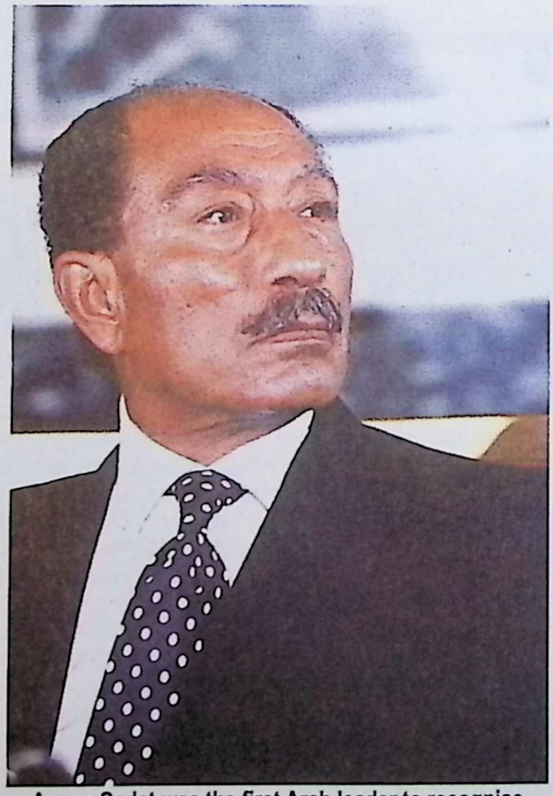
An Egyptian Tale . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Egypt finally has another soldier at its helm. With General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi taking over as the country's president, after his people gave him as much as ninety three per cent of the vote, you can be sure the country has passed into the hands of the military for yet one more long stretch of time. Go back to 1952, when a revolution led by General Neguib and Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser removed the sybaritic King Farouk and indeed the monarchy.

That was a good revolution, for it put an end to the decadence that all monarchies are in modern times, and replaced it with a republic. In two years, though, Nasser had turfed Neguib out and taken complete control of Egypt. Nasser, in the course of the next nearly two decades, turned into a model of bold leadership for the Arab world. When the British and the French, along with the Israelis, went to war against Egypt over Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, global opinion saw Nasser as the victim. Under pressure from US President Dwight Eisenhower, the three countries halted their operations.

But if that was Nasser's finest hour, his worst came in June 1967 when a preemptive strike was launched by Israel on Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The Six-Day War left the armies and air forces of the three countries destroyed. Egypt lost the Sinai, half of Jordan went under Israeli occupation and Syria saw the Golan Heights seized by Israel. A traumatised Nasser went on television and announced his resignation. Howls of protest at his decision made him stay on. Meanwhile, his defence minister, Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, either killed himself or was forced, as Erwin Rommel was, to commit suicide.



Anwar Sadat was the first Arab leader to recognise the state of Israel after its creation in 1948.

Nasser stayed in power till September 1970, when he died of a heart attack. He was quickly replaced by his fellow officer in the 1952 revolution and vice president Anwar Sadat. The new man soon went into a steady dismantling of the Nasser legacy, beginning with the removal of Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, the influential editor of the newspaper Al-Ahram and known for his loyalty to Nasser. If Nasser was the consummate populist and revolutionary, Sadat was to turn out to be a symbol of pragmatism and respected by and large across the world. And he went about achieving that niche through launching the October 1973 war against Israel. Egypt did not win that war, but the sheer suddenness of it convinced the Israelis and their American allies that conditions needed to change.

And that led to what has now come to be known as shuttle diplomacy, undertaken by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. And Sadat ensured for himself a place in history when he travelled to Jerusalem in November 1977 and dramatically informed the world that he was prepared for peace with the enemy. The result was the Camp David accord, brokered by US President Jimmy Carter, between him and Israel's hardline prime minister Menachem Begin. But Sadat was to pay a price for his courage. His fellow Arab