Ahmed Abdalla: Youth Leader, Intellectual, and Community Worker

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The Youth Leader

In Spring 2003 after the US-led invasion of Iraq, I met Ahmed Abdalla (1950-2006) with friends at a small restaurant near the American University of Beirut. They introduced him to me as one of the leaders of the Egyptian student movement in the 1970s. That evening, we engaged in long political conversations on the dark future of the Arab region and listened to Sheikh Imam songs. Sheikh Imam and poet Ahmed Fouad Nigm were major cultural symbols of left-wing politics and popular mobilization in Egypt in the 1970s. Even today, I can recall the imprint of Abdalla's charming presence, conviviality, wit, and charisma. I met him for few times after that encounter but it was the 2011 Egyptian revolution that reintroduced contentious politics to Egyptian and Arab political life and that led me to rediscover Ahmed Abdalla, not only as the leader of the student movement in its 1971-1973 moments, but as an intellectual and a community worker who spent his life struggling for Egypt's national cause, its youth, and underprivileged classes. Abdalla's relevance to Egyptian politics today is observed at two junctures: when the political sphere in Egypt opened post-2011 and he became a symbol of continuity with a past of social mobilization and political struggle; and as the political sphere is

closing again, his life as well as his writings proved to contain valuable insight into understanding the disquiet Egypt is living in today. A student political leader, an academic graduate of Cambridge, and an Old Cairo grassroots development actor, studying the history of Abdalla's marginalisation by the Egyptian regime helps us to understand the relationship between challenging power at the levels of youth activism, intellectual pursuit, and grassroots social work, and the challenges an intellectual has to endure to remain honest to his ideals and to his independent search for knowledge.

A social liberal and an economic socialist, Abdalla belonged to the generation whose questions, struggles, and motives linked the personal to the national and the global. To write about Ahmed Abdalla, one cannot help but start from the major formative life-marker on Abdalla and his generation, the June 1967 Egyptian military defeat and subsequent occupation of Sinai by Israel, known as Naksa. Abdalla described the defeat he experienced as a seventeen-year-old as a "great psychological shock" which shattered the worldview, ideas, and concepts of his generation (Abdalla, "Egyptian Generation" 71). It also destabilised the Nasser regime and as a result allowed "a rebellious minority" of young people to gain a "new courage" to self-organise and engage in politics ("Egyptian Generation" 74). The "most vocal expression of public unrest following the defeat of 1967" was the student uprising of February 1968, where students across ideological divides confronted Nasser's regime (Abdalla, "Student Movement" 149). Abdalla's role grew from participating in what he described as "a reaction to the 1967 defeat" ("Egyptian Generation" 77) to leading a "rebellion" against the Sadat regime's control over youth and their organisations ("Student Movement" 176). At the age of twenty-two, Abdalla was named a leader of the student movement, where he played a major role in the January 1972 student uprising and the mobilisations of the subsequent academic year 1972/1973, leading to his detention in December of that year.[1]

Abdalla's 1970s generation challenged Nasser's legacy, even while they continued to be inspired by the Third World National Liberation Movements he was part of. Their rebellion against the regime questioned its ways but not its goals. They requested democracy as a means to hold accountable those responsible for the military defeat, to allow freedom of thought and political organisation, and to mobilise against the defeat becoming a total national surrender (Hisham). In the late 1960s early 1970s, large numbers of politicised students became attracted to Marxist literature and revolutionary theory as part of a global movement inspired by the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam resistance against the US, and other self-determination and national independence movements. Majority-youth Marxist organisations of all sizes were established. Abdalla did not belong to any organised political group, for he was known to prefer his intellectual and political independence but associated himself with the left-wing socialist student movement (*Al-Talaba* 16). Countering this movement stood students with a different ideology, establishing *al-Jamāʿat al-Islāmiyyat* (the Islamic Groups), a new political Islamic hybrid trend influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism, or what they considered to be an alternative to a "failed Nasserist dream" (Tamam 8). Abdalla identified the "radical left" and the "Islamic fundamentalists" as the major "polar opposites" organising, recruiting, and mobilising students (Abdalla, *Al-Talaba* 413). This polarization within the student body was encouraged by Sadat's governmental policies. For while Islamist students participated in the student uprising of 1968 as part of a general student mobilisation bringing together different ideolo-

gies, Islamists in 1972 marched against the student occupation of the University Hall and chanted against communism. What came to be called the 1970s' student movement, which Abdalla led in its 1972 moment, is thus a congregation of a generally left-leaning block bringing together the radical left and the Arab nationalists who took the name of Nasserists. This movement excludes the Islamic students who were growing in power and who slowly succeeded in exerting their control over the Egyptian University, winning the seat of president of the Cairo student union in 1975 (Taman). Abdalla was not in Egypt then to witness this shift. In 1974, he moved to the United Kingdom, after he had spent nine months in prison (December 1972 – September 1973). He was number one on a list of 56 students accused of

"publishing false news and rumours", "inciting the students", and "collaborating" amongst each other in order to "disturb the public order, harm the public interest, and attack the existing regime" (Amin 624-6).

One of the confiscated documents the judges used to interrogate Abdalla in 1973 was a handwritten article titled "What is the Student Movement?" (republished in Amin). Abdalla hung this article as a wall magazine on 28 October 1972 at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, where he was studying. In the article he asserted that

"the student movement was not a person or another who could be watched or monitored, but the cause of liberating a country, and as long as liberation is postponed, the situation keeps risking to escalate" (Amin 101).

He added that

"the intellectual differences among students are all fused in the crucible of national views", and that "the central security might succeed in liquidating protests and sit-ins, but it cannot succeed in liquidating conscious minds" (Amin 102).

Consciousness in this context is a shared generational preoccupation with questions regarding Egypt's liberation, freedom, and progress. The slow liquidation of the movement, however, happened as a result of Sadat gaining legitimacy after fighting the 1973 war with Israel. The student movement lost fighting the war as its main organising impetus. The Islamic groups grew in power benefiting from the Sadat regime's *laissez-aller* attitude

towards their political mobilisation among students, and its clampdown on the student movement and the Marxist organisations as part of a pro-US Cold War alignment. It was the liquidation of that generation's consciousness that was more difficult. They remained active in resisting the implications of the Camp David Accords to build relationships between Israel and Egypt by initiating anti-normalisation campaigns. Abdalla left Egypt for the UK following his long 1973 detention; however, he did not give up and sought a deeper understanding of the history of the student movement and its role in Egyptian national politics. His research culminated in a Ph.D. thesis later published in both English (1985) and Arabic (2007).

The Intellectual

Abdalla's intellectual project was indistinguishable from his political project of social liberalism and economic socialism. He started a self-funded Ph.D. at King's College Cambridge during his second year in the UK. He worked in different kinds of occupations, ranging from menial restaurant jobs to research work at the Arab Planning Institute in Kuwait. He chose his dissertation topic, "The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt", based on a clear historic and generational

positionality, an awareness he said he shared with the 1970s generation of active students, who in seeking historical knowledge of Egypt's student movement since independence, sought inspiration for their own political movement (Abdalla, *Al-Talaba* 15). Abdalla neither approached the generational issue from a perspective of bias towards his generation nor eulogised younger generations. He identified, however, a *generational problematic* and proposed ways to deal with it (Abdalla, *Humūm Miṣr*). The problematic was that there were *generations* closer to the position of *monopoly* and generations closer to the position of *exclusion*, causing a social polarization as severe as class and political divisions in Egypt in the 1990s (Abdalla, *Humūm Miṣr* 618). This problematic also helps to explain the different generational polarizations visible since the 2011 revolution across and within the political divides. Abdalla in the 1980s and 1990s tried practical efforts towards closing the rift between different generations. He established scientific platforms for young researchers in Cairo to express their ambitions and concerns and organised workshops and seminars as pressure groups that led to different interaction and cooperation across the divide (Abdalla 619). These initiatives, however, remained far from constituting a national trend and

impacted only those within the scope of Abdalla's influence in Egypt, an influence excluded to the margins of the Egyptian state's intellectual, media, and political life. In order to understand the type of intellectual Abdalla constituted, it is necessary to build on his differentiation between two trends of intellectuals engaged in social change in Egypt. Firstly, those who depended on state institutions and called for social change through reform; secondly, those who questioned the formation of state institutions and called for democratic struggle to change the state foundations (Abdalla, *Al-Jāmiʿ* 132). He positioned himself in the second trend, where he refused state legitimacy inherent within state institutional power, called for popular legitimacy which represented the will of the civil society, and advocated for the establishment of non-suppressive state institutions as a means to break away from tyranny (Abdalla, *Al-Jāmiʿ* 132-3).

The state-dependent approach to social change was not the only shortcoming of Egyptian intellectual elites Abdalla criticised. Intellectuals across the board have also exhibited internal and relational deficiencies. Firstly, intellectual elites both in power and in the opposition have built weak relationships with the populace, who do not constitute sources of political

power (Abdalla, *Al-Jāmiʿ* 136). Secondly, intellectual elites failed to prove their respect for democratic processes within their parties and organizations (138). This can also be extended to the political struggle in general, where they have expressed weak commitment to the democratic tradition, especially with regards to the representation of Islamists (142). Abdalla believed that democratic principles were the only way for Egypt to move away from torture and rigging elections and towards building a state that gives hope to young people (143). His interest in analysing the necessary conditions for Egypt to become a democratically stable country also led him to look into the factors that might enforce or impede the role of the army in politics. One important factor he highlighted was the direct and indirect role of military men in political life and the attitude of civilian politicians towards them (Abdalla, *Al-Jaysh*). He explained that the legitimacy of the presidency and the ruling party continued to be derived from the military, although the 1967 defeat subdued the logic of the army model and the rhetoric that social development needs to be achieved at the expense of political freedom. He analysed that it is unlikely for the military to take over in Egypt, but argued that certain conditions might also lead to military control over political life,

threatening the nascent democracy, a valuable contribution for anyone studying Egyptian post-revolutionary politics today (Abdalla, *Al-Jaysh*).[2]

Throughout his intellectual journey, Abdalla remained committed to understanding and analysing the socio-political challenges to democratic change. He not only studied nationalism, the army, and the university (intellectuals), but also the mosque, political parties, and workers unions (Abdalla, *Tārīkh Miṣr; Al-Jaysh; Al-Waṭaniyya; ʿUmmāl Miṣr; Al-Jāmiʿ*). His interest in social change is well explained by Mohammad al-Sayyed Said in an article collected in one compendium of 78 lamentations celebrating Abdalla's life and struggle. According to Said, Abdalla regarded politics as a contribution to civilizational renewal, where civilization is the ability to satisfy the material, spiritual, and cultural needs of the most vulnerable, or is the opposite of poverty. It is this vision of a society that guarantees economic efficiency, social justice (distribution of national wealth), and political freedom that led Abdalla to be a proponent of the rights of workers and the inclusion of youth (Abdalla, ʿ*Ummāl Miṣr* 6). Abdalla's intellectual production remained guided by critical questions rooted in his personal experiences. In describing his generation in 2000, he wrote that

> although the bitterness is still overwhelming, words that were branded in the mind through the experience of this generation remain: demonstrations, strikes, 'wall magazines', … the Students' Charter, the Supporters of the Palestinian Revolution, the Students' National Committee, …, Nigm and Imam's songs, rallying cries (such as 'Wake Up Egypt'), slogans ('All Democracy for the People, All Devotion to the Homeland'), and so on ("Egyptian Generation" 80).

The Community Worker

It is Abdalla's dedication to Egypt which brought him back to Cairo from London in the 1980s. Upon his return with a Ph.D. in political science, Abdalla was vetoed out of public university teaching jobs. He tried to apply to various public institutions, but it was clear that he was on a no-hire black list. Mubarak's regime did not provide Abdalla with any chance to achieve academic status or political power outside the margins. His charm, charisma, eloquence, and especially his proven ability to mobilise the masses, including the popular classes, might have been one reason. Other reasons might have been that he was brutally honest, did not compromise, and confronted authority with a strong intellect and a cynical humour. A friend who knew him while in the UK observed that his short-temperedness grew after he moved back to Egypt. Moving up the class ladder did not rid him of his pride of having a working-class background or prevent him from returning to serve the popular community where he grew up in Old Cairo. One university colleague of his explained that it is his mother who inspired his rootedness in Ayn al-Sira. His mother, a woman with a strong character, raised him and his sister with the fruits of her labour as a seamstress. His estimation for Ayn al-Sira is clear in the dedication of his first book: "To the people of Masr al-Qadeema (Old Cairo), the illiterate who gave me knowledge; the poor who enriched my conscience" (Abdalla, *Student Movement*). This recognition did not dwindle with time, for sixteen years later, he again gave the credit to Egypt's working class whose givings "allowed him to earn his education and to achieve class mobility"; he described the knowledge he was producing as a kind of "paying back" (Abdalla, ʿ*Ummāl Miṣr* 6). It was not knowledge alone which he paid back, for in 1993, he initiated al-Geel Centre, a research and community development centre dedicated to social research, youth

studies, and social services mainly around child labour.

Abdalla built the centre and contributed to its construction on a plot of land belonging to the Community Development Organization headed by al-Sheikh al-Koumy. The funding was mainly comprised of donations by friends from all over the world; individual donations that kept the centre working when Abdalla refused to become dependent on donor organizations. Abdalla, keen to remain independent from donor funding, earned his livelihood by taking visiting professorship appointments in various universities around the world. Al-Geel was the space to continue his engagement in social change and social justice issues at both theoretical and practical levels. It was one of the early civil society initiatives that regarded social science research as a basic component of community development work. An approach that viewed knowledge, politics, human rights, and dignity as intertwined. One of the first events the centre organised was an academic seminar in collaboration with the American University of Cairo, Ain Shams University, and Harvard University, titled *Studying the Egyptian Society: The Concerns of Young Scholars*. In 1994, Abdalla published the conference pro-

ceedings in an edited volume under the title *Humūm Miṣr wa-ʾAzma al-ʿAql al-Shābba* (Egypt's Concerns and the Crisis of Young Minds). Al-Geel Centre also depended on volunteers and succeeded in recruiting university youth to empower the children of Ayn al-Sira. Rida Abdul Hamid, a long-time volunteer at the centre, however, pointed to how academic research and socioeconomic development components remained separate. The academic research component hosted local and international researchers and organised panels that mainly engaged in macro socio-political questions, while the development projects targeted micro social, political, and cultural issues. The centre developed two projects with children: one on child labour with working children (1995-2000) and a children's club (2000-2006). Abdalla's intellectual work and commitment to the underprivileged thus merged in al-Geel Centre, where he built strong relationships with the populace, and he aspired to respect democratic processes in the organization. Abdalla succeeded in empowering the children and the volunteers of the centre to conscientise themselves through education, and through internal democratic governance structures and election practices. However, he did not use academic research to

directly improve the how-to of development projects.

Abdalla's close relationship to children and young people is traced in the video produced by the centre in his memory (Zaky). And it is said that the children of the club contributed to convincing him to run for parliamentary elections in November 2005. In 2005, his friends in Egypt donated to the election campaign, but the funds were not enough to coordinate a campaign that could compete with the establishment candidates. Although Abdalla was aware of the limitations in the electoral process and that elections needed to be viewed as an opportunity for political campaigning, his colleagues at the centre judged his loss to have had a weighing impact, for he felt let down by the community (Zaky). He died months after the elections, in June 2006. His death was a great loss to Egypt's youth, its underprivileged, and its opposition, as well as to engaged academia and free courageous thought. He wrote in his book *Egypt before and after September 11, 2011: Problems of Political Transformation in a Complicated International Setting* that Egypt's only curing doctor "must be the *Egyptian people themselves*" (40). In January 2011, Abdalla was remembered by his friends belonging to a generation

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of the rebellious left in the 1970s who took
to the streets next to a new youth that
might have not known anything about
their political struggle, or who might have
been their children. The 1970s generation
who participated in liberating Sinai but
were not able to save Egypt from the
social and economic costs of the 1967
defeat, who are said to have been defeated
politically and morally (Imbabi), were able
to hear the same chants of "Bread,
Freedom, and Social Justice" on the
streets again (Mugheeth). Abdalla thus
became a symbol of continuity with a
struggle that did not achieve democracy
but that did not lose hope in building a
more just Egypt. He also remains a refer-
ence to analysing Egypt's political system:
"It is hereditary in either case" (*Egypt* 39).
Whether the "non-incrimination" of
Mubaralk's reign is served by his son as
"heir-President" or "by a military colleague
as President" (*Egypt* 39), Abdalla fore-
warned that the files of commissions,
transactions, corruption, torture, and rig-
ging will need to be kept closed.

Notes

[1] On January 24, 1972, the Egyptian central security forces arrested at dawn the hundreds of students occupying the Nasser Hall at Cairo University since January 20. As a reaction, students marched to Tahrir and occupied it for the whole day of January 25 before they were evacuated (Shaaban 70-8).

[2] Abdalla highlighted a number of elements that might lead to the direct takeover by the military: a) for forty years military personnel were only used to working under the political authority of military men like themselves as presidents and were not used to taking commands from civilian men, and this mentality might become that of the whole Egyptians; b) the democratic experience in Egypt does not involve a wide base; c) the alternative mode of change might be implemented by Islamists, who enjoy a wide popular base and economic power; d) anywhere in the world where there is a civil administration incompetently managing an economic and social crisis, the military personnel are sought to take over (Abdalla, Al-Jaysh 25-7).

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