



TRIUMPH

At the age of seventy-one, Mehmed Ali could finally breathe a sigh of relief. The *firman* of 1841 gave him what he had been striving for ever since he landed in Egypt in 1801: an unambiguous pledge by the Ottoman sultan, backed by all major European powers, that he would continue to rule his prized province until his death, and that thereafter his descendants would inherit the governorship of Egypt and its enhanced wealth. Although this *firman* legally bestowed the governorship of Egypt on him for life, he had *de facto* been running this province independently of Istanbul since the early years of his arrival there. As might be expected, he could not handle his increasingly complex affairs single-handedly and, begrudgingly, he had to delegate some of his authority to a new bureaucracy. Even although he continued to monitor this bureaucracy closely, in the course of time it became more and more efficient and a high degree of professionalism and self-worth can be detected from the voluminous records that it generated. Key to the growth of this bureaucracy and the development of a professional civil service was the passing of a pensions statute in August 1844. This statute awarded pensions based not on the degree of proximity to the Pasha and his family but on length of service, and it therefore was an important step in the transition from household government to a modern bureaucracy.

THE PASHA AND HIS ELITE: *QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES?*

Not all the Pasha's men however could be turned into civil servants, and the pensions statute alone could not transform the *zevat*, or elite, into bureaucrats. After much experimentation, Mehmed Ali started relying on law as a tool to rein in his elite members, and by the 1840s this process of legal reform had evolved into a complex and flexible legal system.

As explained above, the elite on whom Mehmed Ali relied to help him run his increasingly complex affairs was composed of members of his immediate family, friends and acquaintances from Kavala, and former slaves. It also included Coptic scribes, Armenian advisors, European technical experts and a motley assortment of Turkish-speakers who flocked to Egypt to benefit from the fabled riches of the Pasha. Holding together the disparate elements of this elite and preventing them from abusing their powers was no easy task. On the occasional report of lax behavior or improper conduct the Pasha would sprint into action, summon the wrongdoer for a hearing, and then summarily mete out a punishment that ranged from dismissal from service to death. Every now and then he would conduct an inspection tour, appearing suddenly with no prior warning, and would inflict harsh punishments on those who were unfortunate enough not to be on their guard. In a famous episode in July 1844 he sent for all his senior officials to inquire about some serious deficit in his budget that had not been reported to him. When finally some officials summoned up the courage to lay the truth before him, he exploded in a frightful frenzy and accused his son, Ibrahim, and his nephew, Şerif Pasha, of treason and greed, respectively, and announced hysterically that he had given up all hopes of reforming his men and that he would retire forthwith to Mecca (Rivlin, 1961, 70–72).

Besides the imperial *firman* of 1841 granting Mehmed Ali the governorship of Egypt, in September 1842 the young sultan Abdülmeçid bestowed on him the rank of grand vizier. Savoring this new sense of

legitimacy in his relationship with Istanbul, Mehmed Ali found himself dismayed by what he considered the irresponsible behavior of some members of his appointed elite. He would repeatedly plead with them to remember the *dolce vita* that they were enjoying in Egypt. And he would implore them to realize that Egypt was unlike any other country: due to its geographical location its rich soil could be harvested three, sometimes four, times a year; its strategic location, connecting India and China to the east with Europe in the north, gave it a unique position in the world. He would remind them of its long history and, having experienced two glorious moments – the time of the Pharaohs and that of the Ptolemies – he would insist that the time had come to restore this ancient land to its former glories. But this would never happen, he would conclude, if they could not give up their laziness and complacency (Egyptian National Archives, 1843).

The problem was, however, that this “laziness” and “complacency” that the Pasha often accused his retainers of were the direct product of his own style of leadership. Believing that the best government is that which combined justice and humanity with absolute power, Mehmed Ali refused to delegate any real power to his officials and they, as a result, failed to develop any sense of responsibility or feeling of public service. Even those officials who occupied senior ranks in the administration were intimidated into silence by their *veli nimet*, their Benefactor. They would sheepishly present him with their advice or opinion, but they could never take the initiative or authorize policy. They could also never be trusted with “state” matters for these were, in essence, family matters. When, for example, Mehmed Ali wrote to Ibrahim Pasha at the height of the second Syrian crisis, suggesting that he consult with his senior commanders on what they thought was the best way to negotiate with the sultan, his son responded with what the Pasha must have already known: “The generals I have with me here ... are not informed of these matters of external affairs, and if I breach these subjects with them, they will not be able to present any opinions as they have no experience with them” (Egyptian National Archives, 1839g).

Having hit upon the idea of establishing a loyal household as the best strategy with which to ensconce himself in Egypt, the problem that now confronted the Pasha was how to control the members of this household and to keep them in check. Fatherly words of advice sometimes worked; at other times, firm punishments had to be meted out. But Mehmed Ali knew that these were only palliative measures and his political instincts told him that a more lasting solution had to be found.

Mehmed Ali's familiarity with law and history here proved to be invaluable for there is compelling evidence that demonstrates his interest in learning from historical precedents. He was aware how previous dynasts, especially the Ottomans, attempted to use law in order to reinforce their rule which they accomplished through the control of members of the elite, and by trading justice to the commoners in exchange for their production of the necessary surplus. Even although Mehmed Ali was illiterate till the age of forty, he was impressively "well-read", especially in history. His advisors and translators would regularly read books to him in his spare time, and it is abundantly clear from his numerous letters – especially those to his son, Ibrahim – that his knowledge of the past considerably shaped his understanding of the present. That he was intimately familiar with Egyptian history is unquestionable and, as the source cited above shows, he was particularly intrigued by the Pharaonic and the Ptolemaic periods, and less so by the Mamluk or Ottoman ones. From the list of books printed by the Bulaq Press, which he founded in 1820, one gets a glimpse of which historical figures inspired him. Among them were Alexander the Great, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Second, and, of course, Napoleon, all of whom attracted his attention and he read their biographies to discover how they, too, had been confronted with similar questions. The story of him turning down the suggestion of translating and publishing Machiavelli's *The Prince*, because he believed that the text had nothing to teach him, is well known; less known though is the fact that he added that Ibn Khaldun was more instructive for him than the Italian political philosopher (Nallino, 2005, 130).

Above all, Mehmed Ali was thoroughly familiar with Ottoman history and justice, and how the Ottomans – that is, in the narrow sense of the word, “the house of Osman” – attempted to rein in their elite members, the *‘askari* class, so as to prevent them from encroaching on the rights of their subjects, the *re‘aya* (Ar. *ra‘iyya*). Here the Ottoman sultans relied on the classical Islamic concept of *siyasa shar‘iyya* that allowed the ruler to pass legislation that was seen as complementary to Islamic law, the *shari‘a*. The Ottomans called the resulting legal codes “*qanuns*”, and the increasingly sophisticated legal system that ensued from such acts of legislation were known as “*siyaset*” (Ar. *siyasa*). They thereby supplemented *shari‘a* which is most vocal in private law matters with *siyaset* which is strongest in matters pertaining to public law.

Mehmed Ali was intimately familiar with these imaginative Ottoman legal experimentations. Of particular value to him were the *qanunnamehs*, or legal codes, that the sultans were repeatedly passing to prevent their elite members from abusing their privileges and encroaching on the rights of the commoners. By the 1840s the Pasha had passed many such legal codes to organize various aspects of his relationship with both his elite and his subjects. Called *qanuns*, they had no precedent within Ottoman Egypt as there had never been an Ottoman governor who had given himself such legislative rights. These codes attempted to control the elite by criminalizing some of their acts (bribery, laziness, negligence, feigning ignorance of orders and regulations, etc.) and stipulating corresponding punishments (mostly fines and imprisonment; physical punishment being reserved for the commoners). At the same time, these legal codes defined the crimes committed by the commoners and set fixed penalties for their perpetrators. Moreover, and in parallel with the traditional *shari‘a* courts, special legal bodies were established and were staffed by provincial and/or bureaucratic administrators to implement these *qanuns* that the Pasha had passed. In short, by the 1840s a complex legal machinery had been created, one which was instrumental in spreading security throughout the realm, and which was characterized as much by a sophisticated engagement with

classical *shari'a* principles as by an innovative way of coupling these principles with Ottoman notions of *siyaset*. Like other innovations introduced by the Pasha for his own purposes, this legal machinery eventually mushroomed in the following decades into a multi-tiered legal system and proved to be one of the most significant innovations of the Pasha.

MEHMED ALI AND THE EGYPTIANS

If the Pasha's relationship with members of his Turkish-speaking elite was a complex one – informed as it was by his incessant desire to consolidate his tenuous position in Egypt – his relationship with his subjects, that is, the Arabic-speaking residents of Egypt, was equally complex. First and foremost, he was deeply aware that ultimately it was the Egyptians – the people of the land – who were the source of his wealth. For him the Egyptian peasant, the *fellah*, was his *veli nimet*, his benefaction, as he once wrote to one of his officials (Sami, 1928, II, 474), playing on his own title.

There was however a deep ambiguity that shaped how Mehmed Ali viewed the Egyptians. On the one hand, he knew that whatever wealth and power he had achieved were thanks to his position as governor of Egypt. For him Egypt was his milch cow and, as indicated above, he recognized the unique qualities of this prized province, of its strategic geographic location and of its long history. Moreover, accounts of the numerous contacts the Pasha had with European visitors and, more significantly, the countless letters that he dictated to his subordinates as well as those in which he confided to his son, Ibrahim Pasha, reveal that the Pasha appeared to nurture a genuine concern for his subjects. In so far as one is able to discern it from these letters, his self-image was that of someone who had the conviction that it was his destiny to lift Egypt from the misery and darkness in which he found it on his arrival in 1801, and to lead it into the light of civilization.

On the other hand, the policies that Mehmed Ali pursued to

“civilize” and improve the lot of the Egyptians did nothing of the sort; rather, they were a source of unprecedented pauperization, suffering and misery. His monopolies policy, and the draconian measures that were taken to implement it, pushed countless peasant families into poverty as they were forced to sell the fruits of their labor cheaply to government warehouses only to buy them back at higher prices. While peasants were used to performing *corvée* labor on the lands of their former tax-farmers (*multazims*), Mehmed Ali’s infrastructure projects required them to perform their *corvée* services for much longer periods each year and in areas that were often far away from their villages. Moreover, the drastic reorganization of the agricultural sector that the Pasha undertook in the 1810s caused many peasants to lose their land as they became incapable of meeting the heavier tax liabilities.

Mehmed Ali’s factories were also a source of untold misery for those who worked in them. These factories have been hailed by many subsequent observers as having the potential to transform Egypt into an industrial country, enabling it to follow the models of Britain and, later, France in their industrialization efforts. They also add that, fearful of the competition the Pasha’s budding industrialization experiment might have caused to its own industry, Britain opposed this experiment and successfully forced the Ottoman Empire to sign a commercial treaty – the Balta Limanı Treaty of 1838. This treaty reduced the tariff on imports to 5 percent, and removed the tariff protection that the Pasha’s new factories needed, thus contributing to the collapse of what had been a promising experiment. Nevertheless, there were other serious internal problems, ranging from a lack of wood/coal supplies to power the factories’ machinery and a lack of managerial and technical skills required to run them, to over-centralization of command that stifled innovation and flexibility. However, most historical accounts point to a *combination* of contributing factors, such as: the large labor force had been coerced to work against their will; the Pasha’s agents did not spare women and children; the workers often supplied the motive power themselves; a strict disciplinary regime was enforced in the factories; and strikes

and work stoppages were common. In short, while there is some debate as to what caused the Pasha's industrialization experiment to collapse, all sources indicate that these factories were deeply resented by the 30,000 to 40,000 workers who were dragged in to work in them.

Paradoxically, Mehmed Ali's educational policy was equally unpopular. The Pasha is often depicted as opening many schools throughout the country. The peasant children who joined these schools were not only provided with books, lodging, food and clothing all free of charge; they were also given a monthly stipend. However, a closer look reveals serious problems with the Pasha's educational policy. For one thing, the whole policy suffered from a structural imbalance caused by the fact that the advanced polytechnics (e.g. medicine, engineering, agriculture, metallurgy, etc.) were founded before the preparatory or primary schools that would supply them with the required students were opened. Given that Mehmed Ali was opposed to the idea of spreading education to the masses and was only interested in educating a limited number of children to eventually replace the foreign experts whom he had brought in at great expense (Egyptian National Archives, 1836), the number of students in his primary schools was kept very low and could not supply the advanced polytechnics with their necessary intake of students. Very often, therefore, the advanced polytechnics would take students from primary and preparatory schools before completing their course of study. The education method, moreover, put much emphasis on rote memorization and was sure to kill any creative talents that the students might have had. In addition, the schools were all run with a military discipline that manifested itself in many ways. The manner in which the children were snatched from their homes, for example, reminded people of the way young men were pressed into the army. Once "conscripted", students had to be interned in the schools and were not allowed to live with their families. Severe physical punishment (mostly flogging by whip) was regularly meted out by the teachers. Those who escaped, as well as their fathers, were subjected to harsh physical beating. Finally, upon graduation,

students were not free to choose a profession of their liking but were forced to work in the Pasha's establishments. It was this bizarre way of running the schools and of supplying them with students that caused parents to resist the Pasha's educational policy: in some instances mothers even blinded their own children or cut off their fingers to prevent them from being recruited by the Pasha's agents. When Mehmed Ali was informed of these practices he ordered that some of these women be punished by drowning them in the Nile (Egyptian National Archives, 1835).

But more so than anything else, it was the Pasha's conscription policy that caused unprecedented misery to at least two generations of young Egyptian men. The tens of thousands of peasants who were dragged in to serve in Mehmed Ali's army and navy faced unspeakable horrors as they were snatched from their homes, subjected to a draconian disciplinary regime and sent to fight for years on end in wars that made no sense to them. As already mentioned above, they went to all possible ends to resist this policy that amounted to nothing less than a heavy tax in blood. After mass uprisings were ruthlessly defeated by Mehmed Ali they resorted to desperate means which often included absconding from their villages in order to avoid the press gangs, to maiming themselves, and to deserting the army altogether in spite of the harsh punishments laid down for those who were caught.

By contrast, Mehmed Ali's medical policy proved to be beneficial for the Egyptians and was to meet with the least resistance. As we have seen above, the new medical establishments that were introduced in the 1820s were directly linked to the needs of the Pasha's army. Through time however – and as with other policies – the medical policy gradually acquired a momentum of its own beyond the confines of the army and navy and its effect spilled over into civilian life; in the process, it became more acceptable to the population. People's reactions to the Pasha's medical innovations were affected by a general perception of how close these innovations were connected to the military – which they viscerally detested. For example, due to its pronounced military nature, the Qasr al-'Aini teaching

hospital was the most resisted of the new medical establishments. Similarly, the quarantine system that was put in place to deal with the devastating cholera and plague epidemics was fiercely opposed as it was implemented with strict military discipline. Nevertheless, in striking contrast to hardened peasant attitudes against anything military, the various small clinics which were opened, free of charge, in urban and rural communities were patronized by the public who could receive free medical treatment especially in emergencies. Likewise, an ambitious nation-wide program to vaccinate children against smallpox was largely successful. Initially, the notion of vaccination faced resistance when peasants assumed that it was part of a sinister program to tattoo their children for future military conscription. But eventually, and especially after the army had been demobilized following the 1841 settlement, peasants' fears were dispelled; tens of thousands of young children were successfully vaccinated with the assistance of village and neighborhood shaykhs – something that helped reduce the annual infant mortality rate significantly. Finally, and once again relying on village shaykhs rather than the police or the army, the authorities were able to conduct an impressively detailed census which, taking place over a three-year period, was of personal interest to Mehmed Ali – “so that we can know the exact size of the population of our country and so that it can be a basis for its enhanced civilization” (Sami, 1928, II, 535–536).

THE PASHA'S LAST YEARS

With satisfactory outcomes to both of his long-standing concerns – those of making peace with the sultan, and of establishing control over both his elite and his subjects – Mehmed Ali spent the remaining seven years of his life ensuring that his descendants would have an ever more prosperous country over which to rule.

In 1844 he dispatched a large educational mission to France. Given that the mission was to have a military status, Süleyman Pasha, the chief-of-staff of the army, was ordered to select seventy suitable

young men to be sent to France. In Paris a special school was chosen to house the student group, which included two future rulers of Egypt: Said Pasha, Mehmed Ali's own son (b. 1822; r. 1854–1863), and Ismail Pasha, Ibrahim Pasha's son (b. 1830; r. 1863–1879).

The following year, as already mentioned, the Pasha ordered the undertaking of a general census of the country – a modern one in that, rather than simply households, it counted individuals. Amounting to something over 5300 registers, this census is preserved in the Egyptian National Archives and includes data on household composition, sex, age, religion, occupation, ethnic origin, marriage and polygamy, migration, and physical infirmities. The census took three years to compile and is an eloquent testimony of the degree of precision and self-confidence that the Pasha's administration had achieved, as well as its ability to penetrate deeply into Egyptian society.

In 1847 Mehmed Ali laid the foundation stone of a huge infrastructure project that would be associated with his name for generations to come. Constructed at the apex of the Delta in order to regulate the flow of the Nile in Lower Egypt, this project was known as the Nile Barrages or *al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya*. The project had its origins in a plan submitted more than ten years earlier and for which the Pasha had contemplated using the stones of the great pyramid in Giza. His chief French engineer, however, succeeded in dissuading him from the extraordinary idea. After losing heart with the project for some years, Mehmed Ali resumed interest and was still hopeful that this huge project might be completed during his lifetime.

The Pasha's last years were witness to an improvement in relations with the British. In 1843 the British government decided to send a steamship as a token of gratitude; and Queen Victoria bestowed a rare honor by sending her personal portrait. He sent his son, Ibrahim Pasha, on a trip to London and Paris, and even contemplated a similar trip himself, having been reassured by Lord Palmerston that he would be graciously received by the Queen. However, ill health prevented him from undertaking such a trip. His cordial relations with France became even warmer and he struck up a personal friendship with

King Louis-Philippe. In 1845 the king sent him a tower clock that was installed in the courtyard of the huge Istanbul-style mosque that the Pasha was having constructed for himself atop the Citadel. This clock was in exchange for one of the two obelisks, originally from Alexandria, which the Pasha had earlier presented to France as a gift.

In the summer of 1846 Mehmed Ali paid his first and only trip to the Ottoman capital. He was then seventy-six years old – three times the age of Sultan Abdülmeceid and infinitely more experienced and renowned than the young sultan. During the month-long visit from 19 July to 17 August, Mehmed Ali received a very warm welcome and past grudges seem to have been forgotten between the sultan and his vassal. He even paid a courtesy visit to his old rival, Hüsrev Pasha, who had lost all his power and much of his wealth. On his way back to Egypt he stopped at his birthplace, Kavala, and visited the charitable school he had founded there.

Soon after his return to Egypt Mehmed Ali's health finally gave out and he became no longer capable of making sense, let alone running a country. In 1847 the daily affairs of the government were taken over by Ibrahim, now in his late fifties and not in good health himself. Early in 1848 both father and son went on convalescing trips to the Mediterranean. Mehmed Ali's steamer was supposed to take him to Malta and then Marseilles, but news of the French revolution of that year forced him to head for Naples where he met his son for the last time. On hearing that Louis-Philippe had been deposed, Mehmed Ali, now in the grip of advanced senility, contemplated a military expedition to France to reinstate his friend on the throne. In the meantime, Ibrahim had journeyed on to Istanbul to have the governorship of Egypt conferred on himself on the grounds that his father had become too infirm to rule. Barely a few weeks later, Ibrahim died on 12 September 1848. News of his death was kept from the ailing Pasha while urgent dispatches were hastily sent to Abbas Pasha, Mehmed Ali's grandson, who was in Arabia and who was second in line, asking him to return to Egypt without delay. On 10 November 1848 Abbas was instated by Istanbul as governor of Egypt.

Mehmed Ali fell into ever deeper senility during his last months, and his general health was not helped by the doses of silver nitrate that his doctors were administering to him for dysentery. Even in the rare moments of consciousness when he barely made sense, his mind would still spin off on some fantastic scheme, the most bizarre of which being a planned invasion of China. On 2 August 1849 his weak body finally surrendered and he died in his palace in Alexandria close to mid-day. From there the coffin was transported by river up the Nile to Cairo; the funeral cortège departed from Qasr al-Nil Palace overlooking the Nile across the city to the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque where prayers were read. The body was then led up to the Citadel and was buried in the mosque carrying the Pasha's name. The funeral was led by Said Pasha, Mehmed Ali's son; all the surviving members of the family except the new governor, Abbas Pasha, joined the funeral cortège. The shops, however, were not closed, the public seeming to prefer to get on with their lives as if nothing had happened. Very few Egyptians in fact joined the procession for the funeral of the man who had ruled them for nearly half a century.

After Abbas's death in 1854, the governorship of Egypt passed to his uncle, Said Pasha, who was Mehmed Ali's son and who was next in line given that he was the eldest male survivor of Mehmed Ali. Upon his death in 1863 he was followed by Ismail Pasha, Ibrahim Pasha's son, who managed to extract a new *firman* from Istanbul changing the rules of succession to remain within his own line. Henceforth Ibrahim's line ruled Egypt for another ninety years until the whole Mehmed Ali dynasty was deposed in 1952 by a military coup led by Colonel Gamal Abdel-Nasser.