CHAPTER ONE

LAW AS REMEDY

Today is July 14th, Bastille Day for the French, and in the streets of Greater Cairo I saw the splendid decorations the French customarily go up each year in honor of the storming of the Bastille... Yet, as an Egyptian, I felt like a stranger among these decorations, although they are placed in the center of my own country. I felt tears flow from my eyes. I passed one decoration bearing the legend ‘Vive la France!’ and tried to whisper to myself “Vive l’Egypte,” but could not bring myself to do so. I recalled that Egypt is not alive today; it is dying after its divided and mutually hateful sons have stabbed it through the heart.

Sanhūrū, Diary, 1928

1. ‘Egypt is Sick’

There is extensive research literature regarding the process of political and social radicalization that swept Egypt during the period between February 1922, when the country gained its independence, and the coup staged by ‘The Free Officers’ thirty years later, in July 1952. Some of this literature is biased, due to the influence of the negative portrayal by the revolution of the preceding era; nevertheless, there can be no denying that during the first half of the twentieth century, Egypt underwent dramatic and unprecedented economic, social and political changes, leading to the transformation of Egyptian society.²

¹ Diary, 14 July 1928, p. 180.
Falling cotton prices, Egypt’s principal industry (from 17.5 Egyptian pounds per kantar [45 kilograms] in 1918 to six pounds per kantar just two years later), and dramatic population growth (from less than ten million inhabitants in 1900 to over 22 million in 1952) were not balanced by growth in arable land. While the population increased by 67 percent between 1917 and 1947, Arable land increased by just 20 percent in this same period.

These developments led to massive migration from rural areas to the cities in search of work and hope. The result was depressing: The population of Cairo was doubled within twenty years, creating vast, dismal slums and a large social class that was not engaged in productive employment. The standard of living and nutrition fell, poverty was rife, and the gap between rich and poor widened. Over half the peasants had no land or worked as daily hired hands, while the vast majority of those who did own land had less than one fadān (one fadān equals 0.42 hectares or slightly over an acre)—less than the area needed to feed their families. By contrast, 12,000 large landowners held 37 percent of all land. Before the Second World War, Egyptian society was likened by C. Issawi to an inverted pyramid. The top of the pyramid was occupied by the landowners, who controlled much of the national wealth and enjoyed a privileged status and selfishly exploited their power.

The migrants who flooded to the cities had lived for centuries in a rural social structure. The lack of communal life and moral and social restraints led to the shattering of the personal dreams that had motivated the move to the cities. Hope was replaced by a growing sense of disillusionment, frustration, personal and social malaise and resentment. Echoing the political malaise afflicting Europe during this period, these years also saw an unstable experiment in parliamentary constitutionalism in Egypt. During the 29 years of this regime, until it was overthrown in the 1952 revolution, ten elections were held, and 38 governments