



**FROM BURNING BODIES TO BURNING BOOKS:  
EGYPT IS BECOMING A "HOUSE OF DUST"**

**By Raymond Stock**

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German poet Heinrich Heine famously warned, "Where they have burned books, they will end by burning people." But the December 17 burning of Cairo's Institut d'Egypte on the first anniversary of the self-immolation of the Tunisian vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, which sparked the Arab Spring, stands the oft-used dictum on its head. In Egypt, especially, what was billed as a triumph of liberal democracy over dictatorship has rapidly morphed into an Islamist Spring feeding on the tumult of permanent revolution. After roughly a thousand deaths in protests since January (with many thousands more lost in surging crime), the dissolution of most of the nation's police, the dismantling of the formerly ruling National Democratic Party, the elimination of the State Security agency (replaced by a smaller, less-efficient National Security entity), and the virtual closing of the Israeli embassy, the January 25th Revolution has now, alarmingly, claimed its first intellectual institution as a casualty.

Founded by Napoleon Bonaparte during the French Expedition of 1798-1801, and set on parliament's grounds (not its original location) next to the American University in Cairo's former campus on Tahrir Square, the 200,000 volumes in the Institut d'Egypte represented one of the oldest and finest collections in the country, though it suffered from neglect. Foreign scholars who perused its high shelves on a tall, rickety ladder had an affectionate Anglo-Arabic nickname for the place, "Dar al-Dust" ("The House of Dust)." As then-fellow graduate student Bruce W. Dunne wrote for a survey of Egypt's libraries that I put together in 1996 for the American Research Center in Egypt:

"The Institut houses an extraordinarily rich and eclectic collection, including (i) rare books (e.g. the Description de l'Egypte, 2 copies); (ii) hand written memoirs, particularly with respect to the French Expedition; (iii) first editions of 17th through 19th-century art, travel, medical the legal books and treatises; (iv) 19th century scholarly journals; (v) the Institut's archives of membership records and members' correspondence; (vi) Egyptian government documents, and (vii) unpublished manuscripts. There are also reasonably complete sets of the Institut's two series of Bulletins and two series of Memoires, some of which, or extracts therefrom, may still be purchased."

Sadly, they may be perused or purchased no more. Reportedly, a Molotov cocktail (one of many thrown at security forces in the last week of renewed demonstrations around Tahrir) landed within the two-story, Belle Epoque structure, setting it alight. While it is unclear if the fire was deliberate, an Egyptian newspaper published a picture on its website of protesters allegedly expressing their joy at the sight of the venerable old establishment as it burst into flames, and the military has produced another showing a protester attempting to incinerate a parliament building. Yet many demonstrators rallied to battle the blaze until fire trucks arrived, once again displaying what many have praised as the "Spirit of Tahrir"--first shown in the human chain formed by protesters to stop the looting of the Egyptian Museum in January. And there is now an organized effort under Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim, the new Minister of Antiquities (replacing Dr. Zahi Hawass) to collect books and manuscripts rescued from the library. (It is claimed that some 30,000 works have been recovered and brought to the National Library--Dar al-Kutub--for restoration, though most of these appear to be little more than badly charred fragments. Water damage, of course, is also a serious problem.)

In fact, there has always been more than one "Spirit of Tahrir." From the start of the mass demonstrations against President Hosni Mubarak that led to his resignation on February 11 (with a crucial assist from the SCAF—the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), alongside the peaceful, disciplined liberals that got most of the press' attention, was a large group of hardcore

football hooligans, known as the Ultras. Supporters of the Ahli ("National") Club, the most popular in Egypt, the Ultras had built a formidable record of intimidation against the fans of rival teams before the uprising began.

According to Amr Bargisi and Samuel Tadros, two Egyptian liberals with a long record of opposition to Mubarak writing December 9 in the online Jewish magazine, Tablet, Ultras were busy attacking the police from the beginning. Whatever their possible role in provoking the wave of police-and-thug violence that claimed so many lives in those days, the Ultras' actions automatically raised the level of mayhem the number of fatalities with it. Their assaults on police stations helped lead to the general breakdown in law and order during and after those famous eighteen days of demonstrations as Mubarak held on. It was the Ultras who many have said led the charge in the sacking of the Israeli embassy in September, and again during the bloody clashes in Tahrir that erupted just before the first round of parliamentary balloting in late November. And given the firebombs and other objects being hurled in the protests in Tahrir that began earlier this week, it appears that they, and/or others like them, are at it again.

In local news media and on Facebook, some are blaming the incident on the military, which kicked off the latest round with a massive clean-up operation against the tent city set up in Tahrir. The army did the same with the members of a group called Occupy the Cabinet, that has tried to stop the government of interim prime minister Kamal al-Ganzouri (who once held the job for Mubarak), from meeting in his office, as the country struggles to complete the next two rounds of elections (that are being soundly won by Islamists, sometimes in protest votes against the chaos) in the midst of the most serious economic crisis in decades. (At a press conference earlier this month, al-Ganzouri tearfully lamented that the country's financial condition is "worse than anyone can imagine.")

So far, the majority of Egyptians appear to be backing the SCAF in its suppression of the seemingly insatiable revolutionaries--who want them all to resign immediately, which would leave a vacuum that only the Muslim Brotherhood (MB--whose gradualist strategy masks a radical purpose) and more blatantly militant Salafis (who have done surprisingly well in the polls) could fill. Not even a video distributed last weekend that features a veiled woman being stripped half-naked as soldiers stomp on her chest (and pummel a young Christian man who tried to help her), along with several other youths being savagely beaten, has bought the protesters sympathy. If anything, the burning of the Institut d'Egypte (also known as the Institute for the Advancement of Scientific Research, or the Egyptian Scientific Institute) serves as a dramatic and symbolic milestone in the ever steeper descent into disorder over the past ten months.

In a statement, al-Ganzouri condemned the attack as "arson committed by the protesters," who showed no desire to protect "the symbols of the historical civilization of this nation." He added that among the losses were the original manuscript of Description de l'Egypte--the seminal survey of Egypt conducted by Napoleon's savants (though actually there are thought to be eleven others held elsewhere)--and a number of "irreplaceable maps and historical manuscripts preserved by many generations." Other sources say that the United Arab Emirates and France are working together to help the Egyptians restore the building--which the rescue committee set up by Ibrahim ordered evacuated on December 22, fearing its imminent collapse--and its collections. A number of Egyptian construction firms reportedly have offered to conduct that work for free.

Meanwhile, Bargisi and Tadros warn against the "complacency" in believing that the Islamists "will either be moderate or fail to deliver," and that "the very possibility of next elections is dependent" on avoiding anarchy now. Ironically, it is the heavy-handed SCAF, with its own Islamist leanings and callous use of violence, that probably provides the only bulwark against the even more ruthless and anti-democratic Islamists, who will use the machinery of democracy to finally seize power, the MB's goal since it founding in 1928. And it was Mubarak that formerly stood--albeit inconsistently--not only in the same position against the MB and its allies, but also against the military's completely naked use of force, before he was ousted by the very \*organization from which he arose.

Though there is still some chance of an Algerian solution (i.e., the military, which is allied with the MB but wishes to retain control, however covertly, would act to halt the Islamists' electoral victory, which itself could end the new democracy), that remains unlikely. Or perhaps--and much less probably--some other, unforeseen events will intervene. In any case, the (slightly) secular Egypt that lingered under Mubarak--itself a feeble echo of the brief liberal period that existed under the British before the Free Officer's coup of 1952--is vanishing, perhaps forever. And after what to many had seemed a blooming spring of freedom and rebirth, the whole country now appears firmly on its way to becoming a vast "House of Dust."

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