The Contestation of the "Reformation" in Egypt at the end of the 19ᵗʰ Century

Anarchists and Sufis

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Abstract

Researchers and historians of the Middle East have dedicated numerous studies to the nahda (renaissance, awakening) period in Egypt. However, the complexity of the dynamics and issues – both economic, social, and cultural – that affected the country at least until the 1919 revolution has not yet been exhaustively investigated. Through the case of some famous ulema/Sufi and Italian anarchists, our research is in line with previous studies that aim to demonstrate how the renovation process in Egypt is in fact more complex, more articulated, and less linear than it is usually described. The purpose of this article is to provide a more articulate look at a past where sometimes myth has supplanted reality.

Introduction

The quarrel between Roberto D'Angiò and Errico Malatesta, two famous Italian anarchists, originated, according to a note in the Archives of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, with the publication of an article by D'Angiò. The latter mentioned an agreement between Malatesta, during his stay in Alexandria in 1882, and an Egyptian "rebel". According to the note written by an undercover agent, Malatesta "intended to stir up the European population, the rebel was to help him with money and by sending his hordes into the insurgent city."[1] The veracity of these statements is not established, but they are indicative of the strength of the protest movement at the time when the British had decided to bomb Alexandria and occupy Egypt in 1882.

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[1] Note des services secrets, consulat d'Italie à Londres, 25 janvier 1905, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), b. 1612, Roberto D'Angiò.

Although historiographers differ in their description and reading of the revolt led by Urabi Pasha,[2] it is clear that it was the culmination of a highly heterogeneous movement (Reid, 1998; Hafez Diyab, 2011). With the exception of more recent research (Mestyan, 2017; Booth, Gorman 2014, Gonzales-Quijano, 2007), nineteenth-century Egypt, as a metaphor for the Middle East region, has long been described by both Western and Egyptian historiography through very narrow analytical criteria. From then on, the teleological perspective of modernisation with a European face became the main thread of the dominant historiographical narrative, ignoring all kinds of endogenous movements (Bozarslan, 2011). According to this narrative, only contact with Europe and the 'westernisation' of local elites — no matter if it is in the form of colonialism — have been the drivers of the 'renaissance' in a country otherwise closed to any kind of renovation. The result is an almost exclusive focus on individuals, intellectuals and political groups (liberals, religious reformers, nationalists, socialists, etc.) who were part of this 'emancipatory' period commonly referred to as the Nahda, 'renaissance.'

Based on this reading of nineteenth-century Egypt, this article will highlight, from a 'micro' perspective, how the social actors of the time negotiated the social, political and cultural transformations that resulted from the country's integration into the era of capitalist colonisation and 'modernisation.' In order to address this question, we propose to explore the possibility of uncovering the question of affinities and divergences, influences, but also political strategies and conflicts. Personal biographies and particular trajectories are indeed an effective way to examine the relationship between individuals and historical and social dynamics in a given period (De Maria, 2016).

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[2] La révolte du colonel Ahmad Urabi (1879–1882), aussi connue comme révolution urabiste, était un soulèvement nationaliste contre le pouvoir des Khédives puis contre la domination européenne.

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tion(s)" and "reformist(s)" and to propose a more objective look at a past where sometimes historiographic myth has supplanted reality. In the wake of G. Delanoue's work, we have shown how essential it is, especially for Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to give the most exhaustive and multi-dimensional definition possible of the dialectic between "continuities" and "ruptures" which constitutes, as Alain Roussillon puts it, "the very matter and the main grid for deciphering any possible historical perspective" (Roussillon, 1995). However, departing from what we consider to be an approach based on the study of mentalities, which has been gaining ground in recent years among European scholars dealing with the history of the Arab world, Sufism and Islam in general, we have argued that the existence of reformist and modernist currents cannot be explained in exclusively theoretical or purely social/political/economic terms. Rather, a more comprehensive analytical framework must necessarily take into account all of these concomitant elements and above all think of subjects and social groups (intellectuals, elites, subalterns) as historically determined categories existing in particular historical, economic, political, social and cultural contexts.

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Therefore, through the case of some famous Ulemas/Sufis and Italian anarchists, our study is in line with studies aiming to demonstrate how the renovative process (nahda) is in fact more complex, more articulated and less linear than it is described. While the reformism of the secular intellectuals and the new Azharite currents of thought was generally uncompromising towards the traditional ulama and their cultural, social and political hegemony throughout Egypt (De Jong, 1999), it did not admit any kind of emancipation of the sub-proletarian and peasant masses outside the nationalist and/or Islamic framework. In both groups, the historical-social function of the traditional, modernist and reformist intellectual class was to use the peasant masses and the urban sub-proletariat to perpetuate the interests of the dominant social groups — and thus their own interests — whether they were linked to the administration of the old khedivial court or the new nationalist elites. Indeed, in the wake of a history too focused on culture and anthropology (Chih, 2004; Chih, Mayeur-Jaouen, 2002), contemporary European historiography, which has focused on so-called 'traditional' figures and organisations (al-Azhar, the Council of Sufi Brotherhoods, al-Sâda al-Ashrâf[3]), has sometimes overlooked — probably as a reaction to Marxist readings of history — the dynamics of social and political power relations, which constitute an essential element on which behaviour, practices and ideas are grafted. There is no question here that the authors fail to describe the social differences specific to nineteenth-century Egypt, but that they choose to make them one of the criteria and tools of their argument.

Obviously, like all political thought, modernising and reformist thought, in all its variants and forms, is the result of conjunctures, events, encounters and confrontations, and social data. It therefore seems necessary to ask ourselves about the meaning or significance that the actors have given to the idea of renewal and reform in different social contexts. To this end, life courses, biographies and

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[3] Descendants du prophète.

individual trajectories will provide the necessary framework to approach the complexity and transformations of the historical context.

1. From 'Tradition' to 'Reformist Modernism': An Analysis of Power Relations

In his pioneering work Moralistes et politiques musulmans dans l'Égypte du XIXe siècle (1798 — 1882), Gilbert Delanoue demonstrated how, until the end of the nineteenth century, the culture of Egyptian intellectual and political reformist elites was by no means monolithic (Delanoue, 1992; Hafez Diyab, 2011). Without detracting from the importance of the transformations that took place throughout the nineteenth century, various studies have broadened the gaze towards 'tradition,' in order to find continuities, dynamic interactions and evolutions beyond the obvious changes and ruptures (Gonzales-Quijano, 2007). It was thus possible to verify that most of the intellectuals trained in the shadow of the viceroys, as well as almost all of the masses, were indeed imbued with traditional (in the sense of ordinary) culture. At that time, the different currents of thought that ran through the Egyptian elites and intellectuals did not carry 'radical' social cleavages or ruptures.

The original Bashtinian dichotomies between tradition and modernity, low/high culture, centre/periphery, traditionalism/progress, thus correspond more to historiographical interpretations — often anachronistic — and simplifications rather than to historical realities (Zeghal, 2006). Within this framework and more recently, studies on the families of ulama and sheikhs of Sufi brotherhoods have shifted the chronological framework provided by Delanoue to the first decades of the twentieth century. They have emphasised the hegemonic role of traditional-type intellectual classes and groups, especially with regard to their

these two journals. In this sense, "commitment to socialist ideas was an intrinsic aspect of the Nahda" (Khuri-Makdisi, 2013). Many authors have noted that the openness to socialism corresponded to a growing interest among Egyptian nationalists in peasants and workers to make them citizens of the nation.

Joel Beinin points out, however, that in the vocabulary and thinking of nationalist historians in the early decades of the twentieth century, "peasants and workers were seen as loyal extensions of the liberal nationalist elites" (Beinin 2008: 170). The main goal of the nationalists was indeed to achieve independence and seize power while subordinating the popular strata to these objectives. Thus, from the first decades of the twentieth century, the nationalists appropriated some of the social demands of the anarchists, the socialists and then the communists, emptying them of their radicality. In the aftermath of the 1919 revolution, one of its first acts was to crush the general strike in Alexandria, organized by the General Confederation of Labour in February-March 1924 (Beinin, 2008). Simultaneously, the first communist movement was violently repressed by the new liberal government: many activists were brought before the courts and sentenced; the Communist Party was banned in 1925; the labor movement was purged of left-wing influences (Botman, 1988).

Conclusion

Middle Eastern scholars have always devoted much work to the "renaissance" period in Egypt and elsewhere. Yet, from our perspective, the scope of "change" inherent in the notions of reform and modernism has yet to receive much attention. From the exemplary cases of ulama/sufis, "modern" elites, and anarchists discussed here, we have questioned the understanding of "reform" in different — often rival — contexts through the perspective of the variety of individual and collective positions gathered under the label of "tradi-

nomic, and social issues, and active participation in all struggles between capital and labor.'[7]

There is no doubt that factors such as the systemic privileges that the Capitulations,[8] a strongly Eurocentric anarchist culture, language and lexicon, a climate of mutual distrust related to the colonial situation, as well as racist prejudices shared with the Orientalist culture of the time, would prevent a real and radical convergence of struggles within the working class of Egypt. However, even Egyptian socialist historiography has recognized the importance of the anarchist movement in Egypt (Sa'id, n.d.; Abbas, 2016) in the formation of the first trade union organizations and in the diffusion of certain types of militant action (strikes, meetings, blockades).

Khuri-Makdisi has shown that the word anarchism — fawdawiyya in Arabic — appears in the discourse of modernist newspapers, including al-Muqtataf and al-Hilal, in the late nineteenth century (Khuri-Makdisi, 2013). While developing other themes such as Darwinism, the idea of scientific or social progress, these newspapers aimed to present readers with a synthesis of the ideals of socialism and its different currents as a European or Western movement, without however specifying their political claims and activities. Although these periodicals showed some sympathy for socialist ideas, they presented socialism from a reformist rather than a revolutionary perspective. "The type of socialism promoted in the early twentieth century," writes Khuri-Makdisi, "had become familiar and desirable, expressing a vision of society and the world shared by the contributors and readers of

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[7] « Perché siamo anarchici — che cosa vogliamo », Cairo, 15 août 1909.

[8] Au sens large, sous ce terme, on désigne l'ensemble des dispositions juridiques réglant le séjour des citoyens des États européens dans l'Empire ottoman. En pratique, les citoyens « capitulaires » dépendaient de la juridiction de leur consulat qui les soustrayait à la souveraineté locale en leur accordant le droit d'exterritorialité. Ils étaient notamment exemptés de l'impôt ottoman, de la conscription, des poursuites et des fouilles.

influence on the population and the 'subaltern' classes[4] (Chih, 2000; Paonessa, 2020; Soler, 2015).

Antonio Gramsci, referring to the Risorgimento and Italian Unity, stressed that these two historical events had obeyed several necessities and urgencies of the moment, as well as the contingent concerns of elites and governments (Gramsci, 2012).

These considerations are also applicable to Egypt, where the elites' responses to concrete problems seem to have preceded the development of an organic political theory of 'modernisation.' The latter, as well as the work of reform undertaken by Mehmet Ali (1805–1848), responded to two specific elements: on the one hand, the desire to free oneself from the subjection of the Ottoman state and to extend one's possessions, and on the other hand, the desire to arrogate to oneself the monopoly of internal political functions. The reform was then presented as the result of the action of a central power and a part of the elites which, as a result of pressure from European capitalist groups and threats from the colonial powers, had not ceased to appropriate power in return for some concessions to the various social forces (Hibou, 2009).

However, the increased control of the khedive's family,[5] his entourage and his agents over society was often a coercive process. Political and bureaucratic centralisation thus favoured the development of khedivial authoritarianism. Furthermore, it should be noted that many advocates or supporters of modernisation, at least until 1880, did not challenge the political and social regime in which they were expected to work and live. Despite the enthusiasm for the ideas of progress (taqaddum), science ('ilm) and civilisation (tamaddun) with a European imprint, the political model supported by many of the early reformers was that of the centrality of the state, the statistisation of social relations and a dirigisme

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[4] Sur le concept d'hégémonie culturelle de la religion traditionnelle voir les écrits d'Ernesto De Martino et d'Antonio Gramsci.

[5] Khédive (ou « vice-roi ») est un titre héréditaire accordé en 1867 par le gouvernement ottoman au gouverneur d'Égypte.

bordering on absolutism (Delanoue, 1992; Branca, 2007; Sabasevi-ciute, 2011).

Nevertheless, the reformist policies of the viceroys of Egypt (khedive) from Muhammad Ali onwards (viceroy of Egypt from 1804 to 1849) had provoked several actions and reactions from different actors and social strata, many of whom had expressed their hostility. The emergence of a centralised state, the emergence and transformation of elites (Laurens, 1995), the integration of Egypt into the global economy and its corollary, European penetration with the arrival of thousands of migrants, had over time created the basis for a questioning of the conditions of access to power for individuals and social groups. The nationalist uprising led by Colonel Ahmad Urabi in 1879–1882 against the government, the Ottoman Empire and the colonialist interference of the European powers, perfectly illustrates the depth and breadth of this protest movement (Hafez Diyab, 2011).

2. The Opposition of Traditional Ulemas to Reform and Reformism: The Importance of Individual Trajectories

One of the most significant features of the process of socio-cultural change in nineteenth century Egypt occurred within the intellectual groups or ulama in the broadest sense. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the so-called traditional intellectuals, i.e. theologians, jurists and Sufis, held, according to the concept formulated by A. Gramsci, the cultural hegemony in the country. Through the traditional educational system, from the University of al-Azhar to the village Koranic schools (kuttâb), their influence was very great in the country. Similarly, their links with rural communities (almost 95% of the population) were very close (Toledano, 1998). Moreover, almost all the ulama were affiliated to one or more Sufi brotherhoods. These brotherhoods, imbued with popular piety,

keepers; a very small number were in the intellectual professions and the petty bourgeoisie. Many of them were political exiles with no stable occupation.

Their speeches, increasingly radical in tone, called for justice and social equality or advocated change or even the destruction of the social and political order, whether at the community, local or international level. Urban notables, urban middle classes and large landowners, who formed the social basis of the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century, were the target of the anarchists' attacks, which were also orientalist and contemptuous in tone. They also considered religion as one of the forces responsible for the ignorance and injustice suffered by the people. Through the creation of groups and circles, the organization of public demonstrations, they encouraged the working class and the popular classes to emancipate themselves from the churches but also "from the synagogues, temples and mosques" (Paonessa, 2017). For these reasons, anarchists and the anti-clerical groups they were part of were constantly and closely monitored by the Italian, Egyptian, and British authorities.

The introduction of revolutionary concepts such as class struggle, exploitation, and capitalism into anarchist discourse, and the denunciation of the social conditions of the working and popular classes had obviously worried Egyptian and European notables, landowners, as well as foreign finance capital (Hernandez, Paonessa 2018). In the program elaborated in 1909 Why we are anarchists: what we want, they stated:

> 'The commitment of anarchists to the abolition of private property and the state, to the propagation of the anarchist ideal of the promotion of rational education for both sexes, [in favor of] involvement, individually and collectively, in all agitation around moral, eco-

grated into the global network of radical movements of the time (Khuri-Makdisi, 2008). Despite their heterogeneity, anarchist activists — through different forms of political and trade union activism, counter-cultural and educational activities, and the press — were the real pioneers in the dissemination of radical left-wing political ideas and practices, both among the working class, mainly foreign but also indigenous, and in intellectual circles and the Egyptian political scene.

"Their impressive work of propaganda, political and cultural activity, public and trade union agitation," Gorman reminds us, "succeeded in having a wider impact on Egyptian society" (Gorman, 2008: § 2).

The participation of Italian anarchists in Ahmad Urabi's revolt explains this vision well. In September 1882, a group of Italian anarchists, including Enrico Malatesta, Cesare Ceccarelli, Guglielmo Sbigoli, Ugo Icilio Parrini, Galileo Palla and others, initiated an attempted insurrectional uprising. Taking advantage of the conflict between the Urabists and the legalists supported by the British army, but also the wave of spontaneous protests and land occupations by peasants (Hafez Diyab, 2011), this group wanted to take advantage of the insurrectional movement to proclaim a social revolution.

However, the failure of the poorly organized anarchist insurgents marked the beginning of the repression initiated by the Italian consulate and the Egyptian authorities, forcing the activists into exile in other parts of the Mediterranean (Paonessa, 2017, 2020).

The Italian anarchists of the late nineteenth century were not systematic in their attacks on the Egyptian state, condemning its repressive policies and surveillance system, as well as its authoritarianism and abuse of power. Although socially very heterogeneous, the anarchist activists belonged to the least affluent and most exploited strata of the foreign communities present in Egypt. The vast majority were skilled factory workers, clerks, craftsmen, and shop-

not only defined the moral and religious conduct that should structure society, but because of their structure and territorial anchorage, they also made it possible to manage and mobilise the population, especially in rural areas, for political purposes and social control. This explains the ambivalent attitude of the political power towards the Sufi brotherhoods and the families that guide them (De Jong, 1983). The same applies to the Azharite system which, since Bonaparte's expedition and especially after Muhammad Ali's arrival in power, had been subject to multiple attempts at control and subjugation (Zeghal, 2006).

To achieve this objective, the governor's tactics were clever. Fearing to provoke the hostility of the al-Azhar ulama who supported him, he avoided any direct confrontation by letting them organise themselves freely. But at the same time, he multiplied decisions to limit their power. He first limited the authority of the ulama by refraining from consulting them, as had been the case before, and by chasing down the most recalcitrant among them (Crecelius, 1972). In 1835, for example, Sheikh Ahmad al-Tamimi, a Palestinian Hanafi, was appointed Mufti of Egypt by Muhammad Ali, who intended to adopt Hanafism — the legal school of the Ottomans — as the state's legal school.

At the same time, it was decided that only the Mufti would be able to issue legal opinions on the conduct of the government. Secondly, the establishment of technical schools to train the new intellectual elite needed for the reform work destabilised the institution of al-Azhar, which was already deprived of many economic resources (Melčák, 2010).

Finally, the attempts to weaken the ulama involved controlling the Sufi brotherhoods which, from 1812 onwards, were subjected to a central authority (the shaykh machâyikh al-turuq al-sûfiyya) appointed by the governor. The objective of the rulers was twofold: to regulate popular piety, mainly conveyed by the Sufi brotherhoods, which were an inexhaustible source of political support, but also of rebellion, as the Sudanese Mahdi revolt (1881–1899) clearly demon-

strates; and to control learned Islam (al-Azhar) by transforming the ulama into civil servants directly appointed and paid by the state. Indeed, the first and most important of these initiatives was the division of the mystical orders into 'official' entities, i.e. part of the Council of Sufi Brotherhoods and thus placed under the protection of the Khedive through the head of the council belonging to the great family of Sufi ulama, the al-Bakri, and without official status (De Jong, 1978).

These decisions marked the beginning of a process, which continued throughout the nineteenth century and still continues today (Avon, 2020), to limit the autonomy of the ulama and the independence of social groups (such as Sufi brotherhoods) through increased state control over academic and religious institutions. In such a situation, the history of some traditional-type ulama and Sufi brotherhoods in nineteenth-century Egypt often corresponds to another history: that of resistance to the state's authoritarian project of centralisation and modernisation. This resistance, led by traditional intellectuals, took the form of both cultural and political protest.

Testimonies and accounts from the reformist and nationalist side agree in describing al-Azhar in the nineteenth century as an expression of a sclerotic system and an obscurantist intellectual tradition (Luizard, 1995). The new Egyptian elite, including Hasan al-Attar, Husayn al-Marsafi, Ali Mubarak, Rifa'i al-Tahtawi, was firmly convinced that opening up to the West was possible without denying the Muslim religion and culture. Consequently, in distancing themselves from the milieu from which they came (al-Azhar), they had often attributed the difficulties encountered by the reforms to the heaviness of a traditional mentality — often by identifying it with Sufism — suspected of rejecting innovations. However, the discourse of modernist and reformist elites should not be the only criterion for assessing so-called traditional culture in Egypt and elsewhere. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when intellectuals such as Muhammad Abduh, Husayn al-Marsafi, Abd

struggles for social, economic and political rights (Chalcraft, 2008). In contrast, Marxist and so-called 'national socialist' readings aimed firstly to legitimise the patriotism of the struggles of the labour and peasant movement; secondly, to write the apologetic history of Marxist and communist formations in relation to other radical left movements. Also, fifty years of anarchist activism in Egypt have been almost totally neglected (Sa'id, n.d.).

In the second part of the nineteenth century, the main cities of the Arab countries and the Ottoman Empire underwent important changes. They were integrated into the global communication networks (post, telegraph). The development of a modern transport network, especially through the construction of large port infrastructures, linked the cities to the rest of the Mediterranean and the world, profoundly modifying their physiognomy and social dynamics (Ilbert, 1996). The anarchist movement was inextricably linked to the process of global expansion of capitalism known as 'globalisation' in the late nineteenth century (Khuri-Makdisi, 2013). Activists, exiles, newspapers, literary and philosophical texts, poems, but also weapons and explosives circulated from one continent to another. Thus, as in other parts of the world, the spread of anarchism in Egypt, as well as in Tunisia, Constantinople and some coastal cities of the Ottoman Empire, had followed the flows of Italian emigration from a social and geographical point of view (Acciai, Di Paola, 2016).

Most of these were "economic" immigrants, but among the Italians who immigrated to both countries there was also, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a considerable number of political exiles who had had to leave Italy because of the repression of the post-unitary state. Even though, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, members of other communities, particularly Greeks and Russians, were present in the movements, in general, Italians remained much more numerous and active. Between 1898 and 1909, the Italians constituted the most important anarchist center in the southern and eastern Mediterranean in Egypt, fully inte-

led a coalition of notables and ulama — including Sheikh Hasan al-Idwi — who worked to bring down the 'Europeanist government' of Nubar Pasha.[6] Faced with the threat of European military intervention — France had occupied Tunisia in 1881 — but also against the power of the Turkish-Circassian elites close to the Khedive, this heterogeneous coalition, called Jam'iyya Wataniyya (National Union), had ended up embracing the idea of moderate reformism, or rather its rhetoric, which called for a constitutional and parliamentary system. However, the rise of the protest movement divided the coalition and several of its members got behind Ahmad Urabi.

3. Anarchist Radicalism Against the Reformism of the Nationalist Elites

When, in 1889, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh became Mufti of Egypt after his return from exile, eighteen Italian anarchists were arrested in Alexandria, accused of conspiring to assassinate the German Emperor Wilhelm II during his trip to the region (Carminati, 2017). As we have just said, the construction and dissemination of a modernist historical discourse has been consistently characterised by the attention given to the role of 'westernised' elites as the sole protagonists of modernisation. Nationalist historiography, on the other hand, has been marked by the desire to show the existence of a nation, the emergence of a cultured and 'civil' public opinion, and the presence of a modern nationalist ruling class, according to European categories, that would be capable of directing the affairs of the nation. These perspectives marginalised rural and working-class populations and all subaltern social strata, as well as their movements and

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[6] Le gouvernement prévoyait la présence de deux ministres européens imposés par l'étranger : Charles Rivers Wilson comme ministre des Finances et de Blignières comme ministre des Travaux publics.

al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Abd Allah al-Nadim took offence at the 'low-class' Sufism of the popular classes and their sheikhs (masters), they still maintained a considerable distance from the mass of the population. The process of internal modernisation, the integration of the country into the world capitalist system, but also the networks of contacts with the territories bordering or still part of the Ottoman Empire allowed the emergence of an intellectual class that was ideologically more differentiated than before.

However, the so-called traditional ulama still retained their social and political role in the country. They played the fundamental role of mediator between the ruling dynasty, the men of the military caste and the notables (pashas, beys and effendis), the Ottoman power and the more popular strata and the illiterate masses. Their obstruction of attempts to reform the school system is proof of their strength. All those who tried to do so failed. Each time, it took the authoritarian intervention of the government and its power of mediation to make minimal reform possible (Luizard, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, there was no real dichotomy between traditional and modern intellectuals, as almost all of the latter — at least until the end of the nineteenth century — had been trained within the al-Azhar system. Moreover, the teachers of the new schools were often Azharis. However, it is inaccurate to assume that the latter category was homogeneous. On the contrary, we find a great deal of ideological diversity, especially on the issue of support for power, determined by class or social group membership, geographical origin, cultural-ideological heritage and many other elements.

The scenario is, in fact, much more complex than historiography suggests (Campanini, 2017; Corm, 2015; Dupont, 2009). In particular, the nationalist Urab movement had caused real embarrassment among the so-called traditional ulama, as they were torn between their allegiance to the Khedive and the nationalist movement, which was growing in popularity. Moreover, at the doctrinal level, they were confronted with the opposition of modernist and

reformist elements and the risk of losing their positions of power and social and economic privileges. In this respect, the events of 1881 are illuminating.

In 1881, al-Azhar experienced one of the most troubled periods in its history: the ulama were closely involved in the rebellion between the Urabists and Khedive Tawfiq and his entourage. In this context, some of them tried to take advantage of the political chaos, either to thwart the government's initiatives concerning al-Azhar or to carry out their demands. At the time, the Hanafi Sheikh Muhammad al-Abbasi el-Mahdi, rector of al-Azhar and Grand Mufti of Egypt (Avon, 2020), who remained loyal to the Khedive, unlike many ulema who had strengthened popular support for Urabi through their mobilisation, was the author of an anti-constitutional fatwa. In response, students and ulama demanded his deposition (Cole, 1993: 241). There were also other reasons for discontent: Sheikh al-Abbasi was the first Hanafi, a very small minority in Egypt, to hold the position of Grand Imam of al-Azhar. In 1872, he also inspired the first law intended to modernise al-Azhar and to regulate the recruitment of teachers through an examination ('âlimiyya) (Delanoue, 1992). Ten years later, the Azharis demanded his departure and his replacement by Sheikh Muhammad Ilish, a fervent supporter of Urabi (Reid, 1998: 235). A jurist and Sufi — belonging to the al-Shadhiliyya brotherhood — with a very conservative ideology, Ilish was a determined opponent of the innovations and teachings of the Muslim reformist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Pakdaman, 1969). He became famous for ordering the removal of the lion statues on the Qasr al-Nil Bridge, which were seen as symbols of European immorality (Gensik, 2014: 93), and in 1872 he led the protest against the reform of al-Azhar. From 1881 onwards, he had established links with the Urabist camp. The authorities, eager to restore peace to al-Azhar, dismissed Sheikh Ilish from the post of rector in favour of the Shafiite Sheikh Muhammad al-Inbabi, while Sheikh al-Abbasi retained his post as Grand Mufti (Reid, 1998).

In the Urabist camp, next to Sheikh Ilish, we also find another famous Sufi 'âlim belonging to the Shadiliyya, whom historiography describes as a 'traditionalist,' Sheikh Hasan al-Idwi. Despite a very serious dispute between the two (Reid, 1998), they jointly drafted a fatwa ordering the deposition of Khedive Tawfiq for 'apostasy' (Cole, 1993: 247) because of his relations with Europeans. This fatwa was approved in the summer of 1882 by the members of the Cairo General Assembly, which also included the famous 'reformist' sheikh Muhammad Abduh (Sharif, 2006). As with many other ulama, their support for Urabi was not dictated by his charisma or ideological motives, but by the feeling that the homeland and religion were under threat.

This demonstrates once again that the opposition between 'reformism' and 'traditionalism' at that time must necessarily be nuanced.

Indeed, while most of the traditional ulama defended their own cultural positions and traditions in the face of state interference and the threat of European occupation, many remained loyal to the Khedive. Not surprisingly, they included the Sheikh of al-Azhar Muhammad al-Inbabi, the Mufti Muhammad al-Abbasi el-Mahdi and the head of the Council of Sufi Brotherhoods, Sheikh Abd al-Baqi al-Bakri. On 15 September 1882, the latter even offered a banquet in honour of General Sir Garnet Wolseley, the commander of the British forces who had just landed on Egyptian soil (De Jong, 1984: 131). Moreover, no brotherhood officially recognised by the state supported the attempted Urabist insurrection. Sheikh Ilish, Sheikh al-Idwi, but also the sheikh of a branch of the Khalwatiyya, Muhammad Abd al-Jawwad al-Qayati, were all affiliated with unrecognised brotherhoods (De Jong, 1984). The relationship that the Azharian ulama had with the British was again one of equivocal and contradictory strategy rather than a genuine policy of opposition.

Like Abd al-Baqi al-Bakri, his predecessor, Sheikh Ali al-Bakri, had met with the British authorities (De Jong, 1984). In 1879, he