

Boutros Ghali Pasha – a controversial politician of British-era Egypt

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Introduction

In the history of Egypt under British occupation, one of the more influential figures of the period was Boutros Ghali Pasha. Having been the first Coptic prime minister of Egypt, and having assumed influential positions in Egyptian affairs beforehand, his life and legacy need to be examined in detail in order to better understand the Egyptian politics of the era.

The legacy of Boutros Ghali is certainly contentious: while some Coptic historians regard him as a politician who always had Egyptian interests in mind, Egyptian nationalists of the era accused him of being troublingly sympathetic towards the British occupiers. Being assassinated by a fervent nationalist, his untimely demise stirred up waves in the already tense Egyptian political atmosphere that would last for years.

In the following essay, the author will attempt to thoroughly present the career of the aforementioned Coptic Egyptian statesman, and through it, answer the main issue regarding Boutros Ghali: was he an Egyptian nationalist or a collaborator with the British? Or perhaps neither, assuming the most ungrateful position of mediator, trying to settle differences between the interested parties in order to avoid conflict.

His early life

Boutros Ghali was born in 1846, but according to Goldschmidt, the information about his birthplace is far from being unambiguous: he was either born in Cairo, or in Maymun – a small village in the Beni Suef governorate, the same governorate where the Ghali family possessed land. His father was the steward of the estate of Egyptian prince Mustafa Fadil.¹

Boutros Ghali received extensive education. He was one of the beneficiaries of the reforms of the then Patriarch Cyril IV: for eight years, the later statesman was a student at Harat Saqqayin, one of the modern schools established by the Patriarch. Afterwards, he continued his studies at the Mustafa Fadil School. Then, while he returned to Harat Saqqayin as a teacher, Boutros Ghali also studied at the School of Translation in Egypt, where he acquired a broad knowledge of foreign languages, as he learned French, Turkish, Persian, Arabic, and Coptic.²

¹ Goldschmidt, 184.

² *Ibid.*

His career started as a clerk and interpreter at the Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria. His ascendance into politics began when Sharif Pasha, the then minister of justice, noticed his knowledge of languages, and invited him in 1873 to the position of head clerk in the Ministry of Justice. Boutros Ghali then provided assistance in the establishment of the Mixed Courts: aiding the renowned Egyptian legal scholar Muhammad Qadri³ in the translation of the Mixed Courts' law code in Arabic. He would also assume a position in 1875 as clerk in the new institution, according to Seikaly.⁴ The cooperation between Boutros Ghali and Muhammad Qadri did not end with the Mixed Courts: Ghali would also help the Egyptian jurist in the preparation of the legislation for the National Courts in Egypt. More interesting is the fact that the young Boutros Ghali managed to accomplish all of this with no official legal education.⁵

At the same time, Boutros Ghali was already an important player in Coptic communal affairs. Being already a rising politician in the Egyptian political arena, he was in an adequate position to support the establishment and governmental recognition of the *Majlis al-Milli*, the Coptic Lay Council. Besides him being one of the founders, he was also the author of the letter to the Egyptian Khedive on 2 February 1874, in which he asked for the latter's permission to establish a Coptic institution of laymen, with the task of supervising the financial and civil affairs of their community. The Khedive responded in a positive manner, and the council was established by a Khedival decree on 15 February 1874. The council was one of the major successes in Boutros Ghali's career, even though the functions and powers of the Lay Council became a major point of contention between the Coptic church and the lay community.⁶

But to return to the general Egyptian political scene: Boutros Ghali's efforts in the establishment of the Mixed Courts did not go unnoticed by the then Prime Minister Nubar Pasha, who appointed him as the commissioner representing the Egyptian government in the Public Debt Commission in 1876. In the later years, he would often serve as an intermediary between the Egyptian government and its creditors during the financial crisis between 1876 and 1882.⁷

However, his affairs with the Ministry of Justice did not end at all. In 1879, he was once again transferred to the Ministry, and he was soon appointed as its secretary-general. In the same year, he also received the title of Bey.⁸

The 'Urabi revolt and the appearance of the British

The years of 1881-82 were a pivotal period both in the political career of Boutros Ghali and in Egyptian politics in general. In September 1881, he was briefly made first secretary of the Council of Ministers, but only a month later he returned again to the Ministry of Jus-

³ For more, see: Debs, 67-68.

⁴ See and compare: Goldschmidt, 184; Seikaly, 112.

⁵ Goldschmidt, 184; Seikaly, 113.

⁶ Goldschmidt, 184; Ibrahim, 35; Meinardus, 71. For more information on the Lay Council, see the book of Vivian Ibrahim.

⁷ The commission was responsible for supervising the repayment of the Egyptian public debt. See: Goldschmidt, 184; Seikaly, 112.

⁸ Goldschmidt, 184; Seikaly, 112.

tice, having been appointed as deputy minister of justice, a position he retained until 1893.⁹ During his tenure as deputy minister, he reorganized the Egyptian judiciary system.¹⁰

In the meantime, Egypt had to deal with the military revolt of Colonel ‘Urabi, a nationalist uprising against the Khedival regime and the perceptibly increasing British influence in the country. Boutros Ghali’s role in the events should be separated into two distinct phases.

In the ascendant phase of the revolt, Boutros Ghali assumed a supportive stance, along with the Coptic Patriarch Cyril V. The two of them also worded a manifesto in support of ‘Urabi, accusing Khedive Taufiq of complicity with the British. He was also active as a lower-profile actor, participating in the Chamber of Deputies, which at the time did not exactly adopt the most cooperative stance towards the Khedive.¹¹

However his position was changed possibly by two events. On 21 May 1882, via a Khedival decree, Taufiq awarded the title of Pasha to Boutros Ghali, being the first Coptic personality in Egypt to receive such an honor.¹² More important was, however, the intervention of the British. When in late 1882 it became clear to Ghali Pasha that the ‘Urabi revolt was practically lost, he opted for the position of mediator between the parties.¹³

It was him who convinced ‘Urabi Pasha to cease resisting the British armies, and it was Ghali Pasha who conveyed ‘Urabi’s request for clemency (also an advice of Ghali) towards Khedive Taufiq. Even though mercy was denied to ‘Urabi, it was during these events that Boutros Ghali established himself as an emissary and mediator in Egyptian politics, a role he would often assume in the following years.¹⁴ It must be noted that, according to Goldschmidt, Ghali Pasha also mediated between the Khedive and many of ‘Urabi’s followers, saving many of them from the death penalty that would have otherwise awaited them.¹⁵

Ascendance as a politician

Ghali’s actions during the ‘Urabi revolt raised his prestige in Egyptian political circles. This, and his good relations with both Nubar and Sharif Pasha aided his career greatly. As mentioned before, he was deputy minister of justice from 1881 to 1893. Still preceding the ‘Urabi revolt, Ghali and Nubar cooperated on a legal code regarding the Mixed Courts. Similarly, in 1883, he had a primary role in the creation of the Native Courts.¹⁶

One year later, he was elected as the head of the commission responsible for the appointment of judges to the Native Courts. During his tenure as such, he was accused of appointing a significant number of Copts as judges, regardless of their professional qualifications. However, the former episode did not stir up as much of a scandal as Ghali’s appointment as head of a similar commission, but tasked with the appointment of judges to the Shari’a courts in 1886. Even though the appointment in itself was unusual, Boutros Ghali managed

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Meinardus, 86.

¹¹ Seikaly, 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, also see endnote no. 3 in Seikaly’s work.

¹³ Seikaly, 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Goldschmidt, 184.

¹⁶ Seikaly, 113-114.

to add fuel to the fire by announcing, among others, substantial reforms to the system of Shari'a courts. The reaction of the clerics of Al-Azhar and the press was so heated – they even voiced (ultimately baseless) fears that Ghali was planning to abolish the Shari'a court system – that Lord Cromer, the British Agent at the time, even had to increase the British garrison in Cairo. Nonetheless, Ghali emerged from the scandal unscathed.¹⁷

A couple of mostly eventless years followed in Ghali's career, until the Ministerial Crisis at the beginning of 1893. Boutros Ghali benefited greatly from the power struggle between British Consul-General Cromer and the new Khedive Abbas: while the latter had to appoint the British Agent's choice for Prime Minister, in the person of Riyad Pasha, Boutros Ghali received and managed to hold onto the position of the minister of finance. After Riyad's resignation in 1894, Boutros took over the position of foreign minister, a position he retained until his assassination in 1910.¹⁸

As Minister of Foreign Affairs

His new position as the minister of foreign affairs fitted him like a glove. As mentioned beforehand, Ghali Pasha had an uncanny talent as a mediator, in difficult situations conciliating the interested parties: as Seikaly puts it, the “robust British officials repeatedly disclaiming power but actually wielding it and timid Egyptian politicians coveting real authority but never acquiring it”.¹⁹

Seikaly also quotes an unnamed British official:

“Boutros is a very clever Copt, and manages to retain the favour of the Khedive by sympathizing with his views, while he knows very well when the moment comes to signify in high quarters that resistance is useless, and then he proceeds to do all in his power to expedite affairs by throwing in his lot with us.”²⁰

Being a skilled negotiator was however a double-edged gift for Boutros Ghali: while recent Coptic historians portrayed Ghali as a committed nationalist²¹, his efforts to satisfy all the interested parties was interpreted by some of his contemporaries as collusion with the British, and eroded his image in the public opinion.²²

The accusations of Boutros Ghali being a collaborator with the British could be regarded as at least partially true. He maintained good relations with British representatives in the country, especially Consul-General Cromer: besides considering Ghali for the position of the Prime Minister of Egypt already in 1892²³, he also personally praised him in his

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸ Goldschmidt, 184; Seikaly, 114.

¹⁹ Seikaly, 114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

²¹ See: Ibrahim, 54.

²² Ibrahim, 54.

²³ Lord Cromer's only argument against such a nomination was his realization that Ghali being a Copt could pose a problem of legitimacy in the predominantly Muslim Egypt. See: Seikaly, 114.

farewell speech in 1907²⁴, as well as mentioning him by name in his book “Modern Egypt”²⁵.

The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement

It was during Ghali’s tenure as minister of foreign affairs that he accomplished his greatest (and most controversial) achievements. From a historical perspective, one of the most important of these is the 1899 Convention regarding an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium over the Sudan.

Having lost the Sudan region to a successful Mahdist rebellion in the 1880s, the territory was recaptured by a primarily Egyptian military campaign. Thus Egypt could have argued for reunification – also supported by a strong legal claim on the Sudan – which was the position of the Egyptian nationalists.²⁶

However, this is where the British enter the picture. As Goldschmidt points it out, the British military presence in Egypt forced the hand of the Egyptians, thus – from a pragmatic perspective – Boutros Ghali’s solution of a condominium over the Sudan was possibly the most the Egyptians could benefit from such a situation. Were it not for Boutros Ghali, the British could have simply annexed the Sudan without giving half a thought about Egypt²⁷.

While the Egyptian cabinet at the time accepted the condominium agreement as a solution, it was highly unpopular among the wider population of Egypt. The Egyptian nationalists interpreted the agreement as losing the Sudan to the British, and Ghali, who signed the agreement on the Egyptian side, became the scapegoat.²⁸

The Dinshaway incident

His role during the so-called Dinshaway²⁹ incident in 1906 would entirely ruin his reputation, though. The incident itself could be summed up as the following: peasants attacked British officers, who trespassed on their territory while hunting for pigeons. During the incident, one of the British officers died. In response, 52 Egyptian peasants were arrested and a Special Tribunal³⁰ has been set up, with Ghali Pasha presiding over it. In June 1906, the Tribunal sentenced four peasants to death, while the others were sentenced to either imprisonment with hard labour, or public flogging.³¹

The irony about Boutros Ghali’s role in the incident is that normally, he would not even have been involved in the affair. However, the Minister of Justice was in Europe on vaca-

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cromer, vol. 2, 211.

²⁶ Goldschmidt, 185.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Seikaly, 117-118.

²⁹ In certain sources also spelled as Denshawi.

³⁰ Established at the insistence of the British in 1895, it was only competent to rule in cases of assault against the occupying British armed forces. The Dinshaway incident was the first time such a tribunal sprung into action. See: Goldschmidt, 185.

³¹ Goldschmidt, 185; Ibrahim, 55.

tion at the time of the incident, as he would have normally had to preside over the Tribunal; it was Boutros Ghali who had to substitute him. And even though he was not the only Egyptian partaking in the process of the Tribunal, he, as the president of the Tribunal, suffered most of the political fallout.³²

For the Egyptian public, the main source of contention was not whether the peasants attacking the British officers had to be punished; it was the use of this Special Tribunal and the severity of the punishment that sparked outrage in the Egyptian public opinion. The defenders of Ghali, according to Seikaly, claimed that Ghali's appointment was merely a formal one, with no legal capacity, and, most importantly, that it was the British who called for such strict sentences.³³ However, as Seikaly points it out (and this author has to partly agree with him) that:

"If anything, this last justification increases rather than diminishes his burden of responsibility. Thoroughly acquainted with legal procedure, Ghali could have opposed sentences which were politically inspired and which, by any measure, did not correspond to the offences committed. With Cromer away in London he could have effectively pleaded with British officials for mitigation of the sentences or, at least, could have dissociated himself, on humane grounds, from all that had occurred."³⁴

Even the House of Commons had a heated debate on the issue. Sir Edward Grey, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time received a heavy grilling about Dinshaway. One of the issues raised was the application of flogging as a punishment. They also inquired about the legal basis of summoning a Special Tribunal in the issue, and in connection with that, whether the officers concerned were acting in their military capacity. A Member of Parliament also questioned if the Dinshaway proceedings met the requirements set forth by the relevant procedural rules of the Egyptian penal code.³⁵

Regarding Ghali, the Members of Parliament were concerned about whether Boutros Ghali was even competent to head the Tribunal. The Foreign Minister responded by drawing attention to Ghali's long history as Deputy Minister of Justice, even though he had to implicitly acknowledge that Ghali had no previous experience as a judge in a criminal case.³⁶

On the whole, it is hard to defend Boutros Ghali's decision to hand out such severe punishments. Goldschmidt, however, points out a detail that puts the entire trial into a different perspective and helps to understand Ghali's motives. He refers to the personal account of one of Ghali's nephews, Ibrahim Amin Ghali. According to this, while Boutros Ghali was in a discussion with his brother, the Pasha mentioned that by ruling strictly in the Dinshaway trial, he saved the Khedive from deposition by the British. He possibly feared that if the British thought that Abbas was a weak ruler, they would replace him with one that better served their interests – as they already did in the case of Khedive Isma'il.³⁷

³² Goldschmidt, 185; Seikaly, 118.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Seikaly, 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ HC Deb 12 July 1906 vol 160 cc1054-7.

³⁷ Goldschmidt, 185.

Appointment as Prime Minister

After a thorough observation of the Egyptian political climate at the time, one can conclude that the appointment of Boutros Ghali Pasha as the Prime Minister of Egypt came as quite the surprise in 1908. Especially since the appointment broke a mainly coherent policy established under Cromer in 1889, according to which “it will be better to govern through the medium of Mohammedan rather than ... through Christian ministers”³⁸.

Let us not forget though, that there was also a new Consul-General in Egypt: Sir Eldon Gorst replaced Lord Cromer, who resigned in 1907. The new Consul-General adopted a policy of conciliation, striving to improve relations between the British and the Khedive, and the choice of Boutros Ghali as prime minister was a consensual decision of Consul-General Gorst and Khedive Abbas.³⁹

The Khedive and Boutros Ghali Pasha developed good relations, especially after the replacement of Cromer by Gorst. The appointment of Ghali as Regent in the absence of the Khedive in July 1907 could also be regarded as a sign of his trust towards Ghali⁴⁰. Even though Ghali was not the Khedive’s first choice for Prime Minister, there were circumstances affecting his final decision. Besides the persuasion of Egyptian politicians, the Khedive might also have wanted to prove to the British that it “was wrong to say that Egypt was a fanatical country”⁴¹. More important was, however, the timely rupture within the Egyptian National Party in 1908, after the death of the Party’s previous leader, Mustafa Kamil. The Khedive hoped that by appointing a Coptic prime minister, he could secure the support of the Coptic community, and undermine the Nationalist movement.⁴²

The appointment of Boutros Ghali also fitted the goals of the British Consul-General. Sir Eldon Gorst’s policy regarding Egypt could be summarized as the following: conciliation with the Khedive and devolution of responsibilities to the Egyptians. As pointed out beforehand, Boutros Ghali was a *confidant* of Khedive Abbas; his experience and efficiency was recognized by both Gorst and Cromer, making him a good candidate to whom the Consul-General could delegate authority. He also thought – erroneously – that the appointment of Boutros Ghali would make British rule more sympathetic to Egyptians.⁴³

However, as this essay has presented it earlier, Boutros Ghali in 1908 was not exactly the most popular politician in Egypt. The Egyptian people did not yet forget Ghali’s role in both the agreement regarding the Sudan and the Dinshaway trials. Moreover, there had already been for months relentless attacks against the Khedive and the Egyptian cabinet in

³⁸ This observation by Seikaly is almost correct: from 1889 until 1908 there were only Muslim ministers (of Turkish origin) in Egypt, with one exception. Nubar Pasha, who assumed the position on multiple occasions, was an Armenian Christian. However, this does not invalidate the fact that Boutros Ghali was the first *Coptic* Christian prime minister in Egypt. See: Seikaly, 115; Meinardus, 86.

³⁹ Goldschmidt, 185.

⁴⁰ Even though it was standard procedure that the senior minister of the Egyptian cabinet would act as Regent in the absence of the Khedive. A British Member of Parliament even voiced his concerns to the Minister of Foreign Affairs about Ghali being appointed as Regent, only one year after the Dinshaway incident. See: HC Deb 23 July 1907 vol 178 cc1357-8.

⁴¹ Seikaly, 116.

⁴² Goldschmidt, 185; Seikaly, 116.

⁴³ Seikaly, 116.

the Egyptian nationalist press, as well as increasing suspicions against the Copts concerning their perceived collusion with British imperialist ambitions – which were reinforced by Ghali's appointment.⁴⁴

In such a political climate, the appointment of Boutros Ghali Pasha was clearly a major miscalculation on the part of all involved parties. While Gorst reported to the British Foreign Minister that the appointment of Ghali had a favorable reception, this was only partially true. The press under British control, as well as that pertaining to Copts did in fact react well, but the response of the Muslim dailies was far more ambiguous. The leader article of *Al-Dustur* even expressed its criticism by stating that the appointment of a Copt implied that no Muslims were found capable of leading a predominantly Muslim country⁴⁵.

The issue of the Press Law

During Boutros Ghali's premiership, there were two additional issues that managed to infuriate public opinion, and eventually led to his untimely death. The first of these was the reactivation of the 1881 Press Law.

The tone of the native Egyptian press was already an issue long before Ghali's appointment. As mentioned before, the Egyptian press was highly hostile towards the Khedive and the Egyptian ministerial cabinet, and this trend continued after Boutros Ghali became prime minister.⁴⁶ Sir Eldon Gorst had previously recommended the restoration of the previous press law, stating that it would be the only suitable means for curbing the editorial excesses of the Egyptian press. In early 1909, the Khedive himself put his political weight behind the issue, convincing Ghali to support the law, even though the Coptic premier was previously against such a regulation.⁴⁷

The law was reintroduced on 9 March 1909, with only meagre success, though. Besides igniting popular demonstrations throughout the country, the law had precisely the opposite effect on the Egyptian press, as it remained as much, if not more provocative and malicious as before. In addition, an article of *Al-Liwa'* in August 1909 praised an Indian who assassinated a British official. Ghali was obviously upset by the article, afraid that it would inspire Egyptians to commit similar atrocities against officials such as himself.⁴⁸

The Suez Canal concessions

Another issue under Ghali's tenure was the proposition to extend the concessions of the Suez Canal Company by 40 years. The matter was raised by the Agency itself, as in a time of increasing Nationalist sentiment, they wanted assurances for their future investments in the Suez Canal. In exchange, they offered a lump sum payment up front and a percentage of their profits, which was welcomed by an Egyptian government that was short on funds, and in dire need of financial support. Ghali took up the task of rendering the project acceptable

⁴⁴ Goldschmidt, 185; Ibrahim, 54; Seikaly, 116-117.

⁴⁵ Seikaly, 117.

⁴⁶ See for instance the remark of Mr. John D. Rees to Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey in the House of Commons: HC Deb 31 March 1910 vol 15 cc1438-9.

⁴⁷ Goldschmidt, 186; Seikaly, 118-119.

⁴⁸ Seikaly, 119.

both to politicians and the Egyptian public. The task seemed feasible at first, as the Khedive lent his support to Ghali, and the government already seemed to accept the course of action. However, a storm of popular demonstrations were stirred up against the scheme, with the Nationalists and *al-Liwa'* at the forefront. The heated reaction of the populace deterred the rest of Ghali's cabinet, and even the Khedive backed out on Ghali, who nevertheless was determined to see the matter through. He saw a potential solution to the deadlock by bringing the issue before the General Assembly, even though he was not legally obliged to do so, and the body of representatives had no real legislative powers. It is claimed by his defenders that he was trying to secure more political power for both the Cabinet and the General Assembly, as well as secretly drafting a constitution that would remove the influence of the British and curb Khedival power.⁴⁹

The assassination

On 20 February 1910, Boutros Ghali's plans were cut short, when he was shot to death by Ibrahim Nasif al-Wardani, a young pharmacist and fervent Nationalist.⁵⁰

The assassin, when asked about the reasons of his deed, cited the aforementioned Nationalist grievances: Ghali's role in the agreement on the Sudan, in the Dinshaway incident, in the reinstatement of the Press Law, and in the plans to prolong the Suez Canal concessions. Thus, from their perspective, Wardani's actions could be explained as a just move against a British collaborator. Consul-General Gorst expressed that "the leaders of the nationalist movement are morally responsible for the murder of Boutros Pasha"⁵¹. However, while Wardani claimed to act in national interest, his actions prompted a potent crackdown from the part of the British: the imprisonment or exile of Nationalist spokesmen, and the silencing of many of their newspapers.⁵²

Wardani's actions also triggered a far more drastic reaction in the Egyptian populace. While Wardani claimed that he did not have religious motives for shooting the late Prime Minister, communal relations nevertheless deteriorated due to the assassination. Partly in reaction to the strong Islamic nature of the Nationalist movement, a Coptic Congress was convened in 1911, voicing concerns of discrimination against the Copts, which, they claimed, is ignored by the British. The animosity between Copts and Muslims would only cease with the revolution in 1919, when they joined forces against the British.⁵³

The evaluation of Butros Ghali's legacy

The legacy of Boutros Ghali is naturally controversial; it stems from the conciliatory nature of Ghali's political philosophy. Boutros Ghali was one of the Egyptian politicians who believed in cooperating with the British. His critics emphasize his decisions that placated the British, interpreting them as a sign of open collusion. At the same time, his defen-

⁴⁹ Goldschmidt, 186; Seikaly, 119-120.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim, 54; Meinardus, 86.

⁵¹ Ibrahim, 55.

⁵² Goldschmidt, 186; Seikaly, 117.

⁵³ Ibrahim, 57-58; Pennington, 160-161.

also provide a distorted picture, attempting to portray the late Prime Minister as a true Egyptian nationalist, who did have only Egyptian interests in mind.

Boutros Ghali was a mediator by nature. He possibly realized that any thought of an uprising against the British is futile, and even if successful, would have only resulted in the appearance of another great power: either the Turks, or more possibly the French.⁵⁴ The real possibility that many contemporary Nationalists did not realize, was an increased share of power in the relationship with Britain.

Ghali had two main tasks before him: avoiding conflict between Britain and the Egyptian leadership, and, covertly, guide Egypt towards progress. However, as the British were opposed to the latter, that presented Ghali with an additional challenge. In the end, he committed the error of identifying with the British and alienating the Egyptians, therefore bringing about his own demise.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ Ibrahim, 54-55.

⁵⁵ Seikaly, 120.