

Gamal Abdel Nasser

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Introduction

Hello, and welcome to Rise and Fall. Episode 5. Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Last time, we started off our Washington Post sub-series by covering the prime-ministership of Margaret Thatcher between 1979 and 1990. Today, we will be shifting our attention to North Africa and continue our sub-series by analyzing the rise and fall of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt between the 1950's and 1970.

Up to now, we've always considered the articles that relate to the leaders entrance into and exit out of office. However, this kind of analysis has two drawbacks. The first is that newspapers may be covering these leaders in more than two articles; not considering other articles into account can severely limit how news coverage evolved over time, which is what we're interested in.

The second problem is about defining entrance and exit itself. Basically, the rising to and the falling from power is much easier to identify in, say, countries with regular fair and free elections, than in dictatorships.

Nasser is a good example of how messy the rise to power can be in a dictatorship. Nowadays, the story is that he became leader of Egypt in July 1952, after masterminding a coup that overthrew King Farouk. However, the truth is that Mohamed Naguib, a general and war hero in the army, was the most senior leader of the coup and he, not Nasser, became President of the newly acclaimed republic and kept some real power for a while. Only in 1956, after a protracted low-intensity power struggle with Naguib, and other factions, Nasser became the *President* of Egypt.

So, when can we consider Nasser as becoming Egypt's leader? And, equally importantly, when did the Washington Post consider it? We selected three articles. The first is from 1953, and gives a profile of all the key players involved in the military coup, and subsequent administration of Egypt. This article gives the most insight about Nasser himself and his political stance. We call it Rise-1. The second article is a short article written in 1955, on the heels of the purges following an assassination attempt on Nasser. The article is a short op-ed that admits Nasser was the mastermind behind the revolution all along. We call it Rise-2. The third article, written in 1956, reports that Nasser has become the president of Egypt. We call it Rise-3. While the third article would normally be our rise article, we chose the Rise-1 to be our main rise article. [TODO: Clean-up here]

As mentioned, Nasser's rise to power was not as neat a story as is told. The fantastically intricate rise of Nasser is, perhaps, worthy of his spectacular career. He was born the son of a postal clerk in 1918 and joined political activism during high school. This came at a time when many Egyptians protested and actively opposed the status of Egypt as a British protectorate. He was a non-elite Arab in a country headed by a King who took pride of his Albanian origins while British officials controlled the defense, foreign affairs, and the Suez canal. Nasser thus felt naturally inclined towards the emerging left-wing Arab nationalism. Furthermore, he found inspiration in history and recognized the military as the perfect place to change the country.

From 1937, he served as an officer in the Egyptian army in different locations and postings without ever stopping his political activism. His career included active duty in the the 1948 Arab-Israeli war whose

humiliating outcome convinced Nasser, and many young officers, that a dramatic political change had to take place. As we discussed before, that change came in 1952 and, after a complicated sequence of events, he became president of Egypt in 1956.

Soon afterwards, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal under the pretext of financing the Aswan dam. His determination when facing the invasion by the UK, France and Israel signals that he understood that the European colonial empires could not act without American support nor against Soviet power. His charisma helped captivate the imagination, and thus the support, of all Egyptians and Arabs - despite multiple military failures. His success allowed him to become the great leader of the Arab world and the great inspiration of Arab nationalism, even after Egypt's crushing defeat against Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. Indeed, when he died in 1970, Egypt was officially called the United Arab Republic, a residue of the failed attempt in uniting with Syria. All of his personal ventures allowed him to simultaneously gain support from the Soviet Union and respect from the US.

Despite his achievement, Nasser's critics claim that he founded an autocratic political regime which left Egypt almost permanently in the hands of the military, a state of affairs that continues today.

Like in other episodes, we will judge the only press coverage of the rise and of the fall, and not the legacy of the politician.

Part 1: Technical Analysis

We start off with the technical analysis. Since we have three rise articles and one fall article, we're going to do something a little different. We're going to consider the evolution of coverage, from a technical perspective, across all these four articles. Since the technical analysis is somewhat more computerized than the themes/contents analysis, it is possible to look at more articles. [TODO: Tidy up or put into introduction]

It should first be established that these articles differ somewhat from each other in terms of the purpose they were written for. Rise-1 and Rise-2 are profiling articles. They look at Nasser and discuss about his general disposition and status in Egypt's politics. Rise-3 and Fall, on the other hand, are event articles. They are reporting on Nasser becoming the president of Egypt, and, much later on, his death. Hence, the profiling articles are generally longer than the event articles. Rise-1 and Rise-2 have 1517 and 291 words, respectively. Rise-3 and Fall have 404 and 882 words, respectively.

This fluctuation in word count - starting very high, then dipping and then becoming relatively high again - reflect the Washington Post's sentiments towards Nasser. In Rise-1 and Rise-2, the NLTK sentiment analysis estimates positive sentiments to be doubly present, relative to the negative sentiments. These are the years 1952 and 1953, where Nasser is seen as a modernizer that wants to establish a respectable, anti-communist and republican Egypt. It's only in Rise-3, the article on him becoming President in 1956, is it clear that he is also a Machiavellian political operator who has won an election without any competition. The negative sentiment in Rise-3 is triple that of the positive sentiment.

Given this state of affairs, one would expect a short and cheerful article to mark Nasser's death. However, we see the exact opposite - the Fall article is 882 words long, and it's negative sentiment score is almost equal to it's positive one. Perhaps this is due to his death being untimely, and literally hours after securing peace between Arafat and the Jordanian crown in a summit in Cairo.

Part 2: Themes and Contents

This evolution of sentiments around the coverage of Nasser - enthusiasm, disillusionment and shell shock - coincide well with the themes and contents in these articles. In the interest of time, we'll only look at the themes and contents in Rise-1 and Fall articles.

The themes and contents found in the Rise-1 article are - [TODO]

In comparison, the Fall article has 5 themes that are about Nasser and Egypt. The largest two themes - Nasser's death and his charisma - make up 31% and 23% of the article, respectively. This is not surprising. Nasser was a very charismatic leader whose death was completely unexpected. Both themes are composed of six passages. Thus, the death of Nasser is covered in much longer passages than his charisma. This could point to a later realization of how lasting Nasser's revolution was on Egypt's governance.

The next two themes are about the world outside Egypt - Arab world politics and world leader's reactions to Nasser's death. The reactions theme is the larger of the two, covering 17% of the Fall article versus the 8% of Arab world politics. This points to two things. First, Nasser not only had an impact on Egypt but also on geopolitics. He provided motivation for a generation of Arab leaders and played the Cold War politics much to Egypt's advantage - getting political and material support from both sides while never committing himself to either. The second point is that the article gives more weight to his visibility outside of the Arab world, as can be seen between the amount of space dedicated to the two themes.

The final theme is about succession. This theme takes up 17% of the Fall article, consisting of five passages. Nothing really stands out about this theme, other than that one would expect to find the issue of succession be covered in an article on leadership change. It should be noted, though, that while the article reports the succession of Anwar Al Sadat as transitional, it is almost clear he will be Egypt's new leader. Any mention of other successors is made as a side note and the absence of credible candidates from other political circles is made clear.

Part 3: Interesting Nuggets

There are some interesting nuggets to point out across the two biggest articles, Rise-1 and Fall.

The first nugget comes exclusively from Rise-1. At the very end of the article, after having praised the dedication of the revolutionary officers, a note is made about the officers being new to politics. Even at that point, it was very clear that these officers were skillful politicians. Indeed, what was less clear is how skillful they were in military affairs.

The second nugget comes from both Rise-1 and Fall articles. In Rise-1, General Amer is profiled as the head of the army. In the Fall article, General Amer is again mentioned as the head of the army. It is interesting to see a familiar name in a familiar position across two points in time where this can't be said of many others.

The final nugget comes exclusively from the Fall article. While reflecting on Nasser's rise to become the leader of Egypt, it is reported that he took power "easily" away from Naguib after the 1952 coup. The reality is much more muddied - Nasser faced a lot of serious competition between 1952 and 1956, and his accession was the result of skill and luck. However, this nugget shows just how powerful the myth of Nasser had become by the 1970's - even for this refutable Western newspaper.

Conclusion

And that's it - we've come to the end of the episode. Nasser, a leader who shaped Egypt into the country we know today. He was a smart, charismatic and ambitious leader who transformed Egypt. However, the continuity of coups and military men leading the country also points to the shortcomings of that transformation. Thank you very much for tuning in!

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See you all next time!