



The Arab Families Working Group

“From Contract to Crisis: Marriage and the Egyptian National Family, 1919-1952.”
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Taken as historical bookends, the Egyptian revolutions of 1919 and 1952 witnessed the celebration of the nuclear family and monogamous marriage. In each instance, images of women as idealized mothers and brides illustrated the virtues of Egypt’s national aspirations. Men were not always present in the cartoons and caricatures that celebrated Egypt as “a woman.” But their masculinity—their very ability to lead and defend the nation, to build a strong economy, to shape a national identity—was constructed through their proximity and their marriage to her and to her ideals. “Family men,” in gendered representations from both revolutionary eras claimed “inclusion” in the national contract through their successes outside the home and through their roles as monogamous husbands, good fathers, and genteel members of bourgeois domiciles. In both revolutions, the family was constituted by a particular political vision—a model for what Egypt was to become—and by Egyptians’ willingness to engage in the marital and familial behaviors through which that vision was constituted. Liberation, both national and personal, was a marital as well as a political affair.

Cartoons from the late 1940s Egyptian press suggest that neither the national-political libratory model of 1919 nor the personal-familial one were holding up very well. This paper interrogates cartoons depicting courtship, marriage and family life that appeared in the Egyptian periodical *Akhir Sa`a* in the late 1940s. In those cartoons married men are duped, overwhelmed, robbed and, sometimes, literally squashed by women, particularly their wives. The marital relationship appears to confine, restrict and, frequently, emasculate the men who participate in it. The negative image of marriage [or

the emasculated image of men in marriage] that is depicted in these cartoons sits in stark contrast to the idealized image of the marital contract that was the product of the 1919 Revolution, and that was circulated in the press during the Revolutionary era. What duped men by the late 1940s was not only the appearance of the “new,” educated woman and her demands for political emancipation. Rather, it was also the failure of the nation state—as it was conceived of and idealized in the early twentieth century and then delivered by the Wafd by 1923—to function as planned. If marriage and political participation had originally offered men a kind of masculine ideal, conflating politics and marital habits in a recipe for political and personal success, by the 1940s the failures of both marriage and politics appear equally conflated