



NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S HEADQUARTERS

Cairo, Egypt

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Executive Summary

During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the Headquarters of then-President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party were set on fire. While initially the building was not intended as a monument, it acquired intense symbolic significance in the aftermath of the revolution. Consequently, the fate of the building in the post-revolutionary era became deeply divisive over whether it should be maintained or removed in its entirety. At present, it remains as an empty lot fenced off from the public. This case study explores the complexity of reinterpretation of sites in the aftermath of mass societal and political upheaval.

Introduction

On January 28, at the beginning of what came to be called the 2011 Egyptian Uprising, the National Democratic Party's (NDP) Headquarters were set on fire. The NDP was founded by Egypt's former president Anwar El Sadat in 1978 and was subsequently helmed by President Hosni Mubarak from 1981 to 2011. Throughout its rule, NDP exerted extensive influence over the media, dominated the political arena, and employed a wide range of both legal and extralegal methods to stifle opposition.¹ Its Headquarters, which until that moment symbolised for the protestors 30 years of an authoritarian single party rule, became, in its new burnt appearance, a memory of the revolution. The following months and years witnessed a debate over the fate of the torched building among those wanting to hold it as a symbol of the revolution and those wanting to remove it and move on.

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government ascended to the presidency in 2014 and made the decision to demolish the building. Given the illiberal character of El-Sisi's rule, marked by a return to the Mubarak era's autocratic style of government, this move was seen by some among the revolutionaries and architecture and heritage professionals as an attempt by the new authoritarian regime to erase traces of the revolution.²

Background

The National Democratic Party (NDP) was founded by Former President Anwar El Sadat in 1978. As the successor of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), which Gamal Abdel Nasser founded in the 1960s, both parties developed 'to fulfil the role of the sole political forum of the state.'³ The NPD held uncontested power as a *de facto* single party in the Egyptian political landscape until the 2011 revolution; the widespread demonstrations which started on January 25, 2011, led to the removal of President Hosni Mubarak (NDP's leader) on February 11. An initial jubilation was marked by a constitutional referendum on March 19, 2011, the first parliamentary election since Mubarak's regime on November 28, and the presidential election on May 24, leading to the victory of Mohamed Morsi; however, the country soon fell into a period of political turmoil and civil unrests that culminated with a popularly backed military coup d'état on July 3, 2013. The coup brought to power General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has been president of Egypt ever since and who has undertaken a repressive policy towards dissidents.

The building was constructed in 1958 by the architect Mahmoud Riad as part of a new skyline (including also the Hilton and the Arab League buildings) along the Nile, as requested

¹ Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

² Britannica, "Egypt: Return to Authoritarianism," Britannica, October 30, 2023.

³ Mohamed Fahmy Menza, *Patronage Politics in Egypt: The National Democratic Party and Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 198.

by then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser. It was initially created to house Cairo's Municipality, but ever since, it has fulfilled several functions – hosting Nasser's Arab Socialist Union, then various political organisations, and finally, Mubarak's National Democratic Party.⁴ The edifice is strategically located between the Nile and Tahrir Square (more precisely behind the Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square), a prominent position in the urban landscape. The Headquarters, a concrete building with a regular façade, represents an example of 1950s modern architecture.

During the revolution, which lasted from 25 January to 11 February 2011, the monument came to symbolise the over 30 years of oppression by the Mubarak regime. Nevertheless, its new state (as a burned building) came to epitomise the 2011 revolution and the subversion of the old regime. Particularly since the coup d'état that brought to power General Adlel Fettah el-Sisi, and with demonstrations in Tahrir becoming increasingly

rare, the former NDP-building seems to have become the most obvious memorial to a landmark revolution.⁵ In March 2015, it was temporarily covered by a banner announcing 'Egypt The Future' (an economic development conference) and other initiatives as a sign of progress and an attempt to look to the future until the banner was removed by a mid-spring sandstorm.⁶ In April 2015, the government – which owned all NDP's properties ever since the party was dissolved by court order in April 2011⁷– approved plans for its demolition starting in May.⁸ The decision followed the government's "beautification" (i.e. redecoration and remodelling) of Tahrir Square.⁹ The government committed to give the land to the neighbouring Egyptian Museum and proposed plans for a public park, including a revolution memorial and a botanical garden.¹⁰ As for today, the lot is still left unbuilt.



Figure 1. 'NDP HQ burned out' Image by Al Jazeera English CC-BY-SA-2.0

History of the Contestation

On January 28, 2011, on the so-called 'day of rage,' three days from the beginning of the demonstrations that led to the Egyptian Revolution, the building was set on fire.¹¹ Within a few months of the event, the fate of the building came under debate.¹² Although most

⁴ Mohamed Elshahed, "There is already a Monument," *Cairo Observer*, April 26, 2011.

⁵ René Boer, "Erasing the Remnants of a Revolution," *Failed Architecture*, June 1, 2015.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Egypt demolishes former President Hosni Mubarak's party headquarters," *BBC News*, May 31, 2015.

⁹ Maggie Fick, "Seeking unity, Egypt flies the flag in symbolic Tahrir," *Reuters*, February 8, 2015.

¹⁰ Boer, "Erasing the Remnants of a Revolution."

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

opinions seemed to agree with its demolition, others wanted to preserve it.¹³ The entrepreneur Ahmed Hafez saw the demolition as a symbol of 'the victory of the January 25 revolution'¹⁴ and as a gesture of moving on from the past. The board of the Egyptian Museum – which was confined to the building – was also keen to demolish the building, which stood uncomfortably too close to the museum.¹⁵ The question dominating the debate among the promoters of the demolition regarded what should replace the torched building: among the proposed projects were gardens for the Egyptian Museum, offices for human rights organisations, and a space connecting to the Nile waterfront and Tahrir Square directly.¹⁶

Promoters of the building's preservation included supporters of the now-dissolved NDP, some among the revolutionaries, and architecture and heritage professionals.¹⁷ The National Organisation for Urban Harmony (NOUH), for instance, pointed to the fact that the edifice was listed among the protected heritage buildings.¹⁸ Mohamed Abu Saeeda, head of the NOUH, pointed out that the building was considered a historical building and therefore could not be demolished according to Law 144; he argued that 'It is not logical to demolish the building simply because it was the premises of the NDP' adding that 'NOUH has written a detailed report explaining the reasons behind its objections, and (created) a plan to restore the building.'¹⁹ Abdel-Halim Nour El-Din, head of the Egyptian Archaeologists Union and former head of the Arab Organisation of Museums, argued against the building's demolition: 'Since it is not a ramshackle structure, it should not be knocked down but rather reused or rehabilitated,' adding that the Egyptian Museum did not need any more gardens since it had plenty of landscaping. Rather he suggested using the edifice as a space for archaeological institutions that the museum currently lacks.

Mohamed Elshahed, curator, architectural historian, and editor of the *Cairo Observer*, suggested moving beyond the usual cycle of rage-driven tearing down of past heritage and preserving it as a memory of people's power, as well as a warning to future politicians,

I think it is time to break the cycle of taking out our anger on buildings. There is no need to constantly "cleanse" the cityscape of "unsightly" reminders of aspects of our past some powerful politicians may not want to keep around. I think the best way to come to terms with what just happened in Egypt and its momentous revolution is to keep the torched NDP building as a reminder to us Egyptians of what people power has done but also as a reminder to subsequent politicians that they too could be swept away by the people.²⁰

Mahmoud Riad, grandson of the building's architect and an architect himself, emphasised how the building's value felt beyond Mubarak's years and the 2011 revolution: 'Good or bad,

¹³ Joel Gulhane, "The NDP Building Demolition: Erasing a Memory or Moving On?," *Atlantic Council*, June 17, 2015.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Boer, "Erasing the Remnants of a Revolution."

¹⁶ Elshahed, "There is already a Monument."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nevine El-Aref, "Ministries battle over future of Cairo's famous NDP building" *Ahram Online*, April 12, 2014. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/98835.aspx>. (PDF 6)

²⁰ Elshahed, "There is already a Monument."

the building has historical, political, and architectural significance.²¹ Riad became the promoter of a campaign to save the building. He stressed the legal constraints to its demolition (it has been listed among the protected heritage buildings 'the government is ignoring the law and demolishing buildings around the country'²²), and his architecture firm proposed several projects for its adaptive reuse (a five-star hotel, a research centre, the headquarters of the Cairo municipality) emphasising that 'renovation would not have excluded the possibility of keeping a prominent reference to the building's recent history.'²³ Similarly, some activists who took part in the 2011 demonstrations hoped to transform the building into a monument or a museum of the revolution or as a site for human rights organisations.²⁴ Elshahed emphasised the importance of preserving the shell of the building while renovating the interiors:

how to keep the building is another question [...] The shell of the building can remain with the interiors renovated to house whatever institutions the city decides, perhaps human rights organizations as it has been suggested. But the skin of the building should continue to show proudly the marks left by the flames that toppled one of the most powerful and oppressive regimes in modern Middle Eastern history.²⁵

These positions seemed to be echoed in the clash within the government between the culture ministry and the antiquity ministry (to which the building's land was assigned).²⁶ The antiquity minister, Mohamed Ibrahim saw the building as having no architectural value and unsafe for the adjacent museum: 'It is like a bomb that could explode anytime.'²⁷ Riad Architecture firm's request to undertake their own inspections to assess the structural stability of the building was ignored.²⁸ More generally, Riad, Nour El-Din, and many other experts across the social and political spectrum complained about their motions not being listened to in the 'corridors of power.'²⁹ Many interpreted el-Sisi's decision as an attempt to erase the memory of the revolution. In Boer's words, 'the current regime seems unstoppable, and the demolition of the NDP-building is yet another political, spatial and visual milestone in their struggle for power.'³⁰ More cautiously, Elshahed claimed: 'Here was the symbol of the country's untouchable ruling elite torched on the 'day of anger.' So why the rush to tear down this most powerful visual reminder of the people's will and their ability to bring down a corrupt elite?'³¹

Decision-Making Processes

²¹ Boer, "Erasing the Remnants of a Revolution."

²² Ibid.

²³ Gulhane, "The NDP Building Demolition: Erasing a Memory or Moving On?"

²⁴ Sylvia Westall, "Egypt to demolish headquarters of Mubarak's old party," *Reuters*, April 15, 2015.

²⁵ Elshahed, "There is already a Monument."

²⁶ El-Aref, "Ministries battle over future of Cairo's famous NDP building."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gulhane, "The NDP Building Demolition: Erasing a Memory or Moving On?"

²⁹ El-Aref, "Ministries battle over future of Cairo's famous NDP building."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Elshahed, "There is already a Monument."

The decision-making process presented a top-down approach. The Egyptian cabinet approved in mid-April to demolish the building.³² An attempt by the culture ministry to object to the decision, on the ground that the building could not be demolished, produced no effect.³³ The demolition licence was sent to the Cairo District authority, which handed it over to the engineering body of the Egyptian armed forces.³⁴ In this process, the government seemed dismissive of public opinion: 'Whatever people's opinions, it seemed quite unlikely that Egypt's current regime, headed by coup leader turned president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi since the summer of 2013, would take them into account.'³⁵ Riad also pointed out how, since the building was a public property managed by the government, any decision in its regard should have been taken by a representative and sitting parliament rather than a cabinet.³⁶ Legal attempts to refrain from the demolition went unheard: to bypass its listed status, in April, antiquities minister Mohamed Ibrahim charged a committee consisting of archaeological and legal experts with the task of removing the building from the National Organisation of Urban Harmony list.³⁷ Riad pointed out how this verdict was problematic since 'only the owner of the building can remove it from the list.'³⁸

Summary and Conclusions

Although the NDP building was not initially created as a monument, following the 2011 uprising it evolved into a symbol against authoritarianism. The debates over its preservation reflected broader societal clashes, merging political, architectural, and cultural considerations. The government's top-down decision to demolish the building, despite public dissent, underscores the challenges in reconciling historical significance with evolving national narratives. Public debates over its maintenance or removal and the consequent proposals for alternative projects did not seem to have impacted the policymakers' decision to demolish the building. As for today, the site is still an empty lot surrounded by its original fences. The vacant lot serves as a poignant reminder of Egypt's complex tensions surrounding Egypt's post-revolutionary identity, encapsulating the continuing social struggle against the country's undemocratic practices and the difficulties of navigating the intersections of politics, culture and heritage.

Research contributed by Pegah Zohouri

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat
Bankplein 2
2585EV, The Hague
The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

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